

FAQs for consumers

1. “What is the difference between a ‘compostable’ and ‘biodegradable’ product?”

The term ‘biodegradable’ simply means that a product will degrade naturally over time. It does not on its own imply the conditions in which this will happen. The term is therefore unhelpful and potentially misleading when used without specifying the conditions under which the product will break down effectively into biomass, carbon dioxide, and water.

For example, a non-certified plastic bottle described solely as ‘biodegradable’ does not specify under what conditions it will degrade and it is therefore impossible to verify that claim. As a result, the claim is effectively meaningless. Worse, this could result in littering if the consumer thinks that it is biodegradable in soil or the open air.

A product described as ‘compostable’ means that it is ‘biodegradable’, but only under certain conditions. Composting is the aerobic decomposition of organic material under controlled conditions. Therefore, a ‘compostable’ product is a product that will decompose under these same aerobic conditions.

Certification validates producers’ claims of compostability and/or biodegradability.

2. “What is the difference between the terms ‘home compostable’ and ‘industrially compostable’?”

There are generally two types of certified compostable materials; those certified as ‘home compostable’ and those certified as ‘industrially compostable’.

A product certified as ‘home compostable’ is suitable for composting in a domestic scale home/garden composting system/process. A product certified as ‘industrially compostable’ is suitable for composting in an industrial composting process.

Industrial composting processes are managed by facilities that process biowaste and/or biodegradable materials on a larger commercial scale. Where local authorities collect source-separated food and green household waste, they generally ask that these biowastes are contained in bags within the collection containers. This is not only more hygienic for householders, but also reduces the exposure of collection operatives to potentially harmful particles released into the atmosphere. The inclusion of conventional plastic bags in a composting process can lead to unsightly contamination of the final compost and, as these bags will take many centuries to decompose, pollution of the environment. Certified ‘industrially compostable’ bags can be used as an alternative.

3. “If a product is ‘bio-based’, is it likely to always be ‘compostable’?”

This is often but not always true.

Bio-based materials are derived from biomass and their use actively displaces fossil-derived materials from the supply chain, so the main arguments for their use are based on reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions.

Compostable Materials

Certification Scheme

There are many billions of tonnes of carbon locked away in fossil resources; using these fossil resources releases this carbon into the environment generally in the form of carbon dioxide which is an abundant greenhouse gas. Where these fossil resources can be displaced from the supply chain by bio-based products this carbon is left locked away. Plants used as fuel to displace coal or oil have absorbed carbon dioxide from the environment during their lives and this carbon will be released when they are disposed of. This carbon can then be absorbed by further plants creating a carbon cycle of a few years rather than the more common carbon cycle of decades or even millions of years.

It is reasonable to state that most compostable products are derived completely or partly from biomass, such as wood fibre and plant derived starches. However, there are products such as polyethylene (PE) produced from bioethanol that are bio-based and not compostable, and materials made from oil-based resources like Polybutyrate (PBAT) can be compostable but are not bio-based.

4. “What do I do with my product after use?”

The certification marks found on compostable products are similar to the recycling symbols found on plastic packaging and other recyclable packaging materials. However, the recycling symbols direct consumers to dispose of recyclable materials in the recycling bin. These materials (e.g. glass, paper, etc.) are then typically processed at facilities for dry recyclables.

Home compostable products

Householders with a home/garden composting system can mix certified home compostable products (bearing the certification mark below) in with their food/garden waste at home. Home compostable products bearing the UK Home Compostable Mark have been certified to fully decompose within 12 months at a temperature of approximately 25 °C.

REAL does not advise on the volume of material or proportion of compostable products to mix in with food waste/garden waste, but these products have been tested in conditions which replicate a typical home/garden composting system.

REAL advises that if a consumer does not have a home/garden composting system, the certified home compostable product should be disposed of in the residual (black bag) waste bin. These products should not be disposed of in the recycling bin.

Industrially compostable products

Householders with a separate food waste collection service can dispose of certified industrially compostable products in the food waste bin both with and without food contamination. You should check with the local authority/council if they have any additional guidance on what they do and do not collect.

Householders with a separate garden waste collection service can dispose of certified industrially compostable products in this bin, provided the products are not contaminated with food waste. This is because most composting sites are not licensed to take food waste. The only compostable products contaminated with food which can be disposed of in the garden waste bin are those contaminated with milk, coffee, and tea (e.g. straws, stirrers, coffee capsules).

Compostable Materials

Certification Scheme

REAL advises that if a consumer does not have a separate food/garden waste collection service, the certified industrially compostable product should be disposed of in the residual (black bag) waste bin. These products should not be disposed of in the recycling bin.

If you come across any product which comes with a claim that it is biodegradable, you should check whether the product is certified to a recognised standard that is applicable for the environment in which it claims to biodegrade. You can read the FAQs page here for more information about this, but if you are unsure, please contact the scheme owner on info@realschemes.org.uk.