

Whole Cycle Tuesday

Key Takeaway

Composting turns food scraps, yard debris, and other organic materials into a valuable soil amendment that improves soil health, supports plant growth, and diverts waste from landfills. However, one of the biggest challenges facing composting programs today is contamination by foreign objects, these items do not belong in compost and can compromise the entire process.

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"The environment is where we all meet; where we all have a mutual interest; it is the one thing all of us share." — Lady Bird Johnson

Contamination in Compost

What Is Compost Contamination?

Compost contamination occurs when non-compostable materials enter the compost stream. Common contaminants include plastic bags and wrappers, glass, metal, and treated wood that do not actually break down in most composting systems. Even small amounts of these materials can cause big problems. Once mixed into a compost pile, foreign objects are difficult and expensive to remove. Shredding and turning operations can break plastics and other materials into smaller fragments, spreading them throughout the compost and increasing the risk of microplastics in the finished product.

Why Contamination Is a Serious Issue

Contaminated compost reduces product quality and limits where it can be safely used. Farmers, landscapers, and municipalities rely on clean compost to improve soil without introducing debris or pollutants. If contamination levels are too high, compost may fail regulatory standards, be rejected by end users, or require additional processing which drives up costs for compost facilities, communities, and end users.

Foreign objects can damage equipment, pose safety hazards for workers, and reduce the environmental benefits of composting. In severe cases, entire loads of otherwise compostable material are sent to a landfill.

The Role of the Public

The most effective way to reduce contamination is at the source, before it ever reach a compost facility. The public plays a critical role in keeping compost clean.

Simple actions make a meaningful difference:

- **Follow local composting guidelines.** Compost rules vary by community and facility.
- **Keep plastics out.** Plastic bags, utensils, and wrappers do not belong in compost, even labeled "biodegradable" or "compostable" unless approved by your facility.
- **Remove packaging.** Food scraps should be free of stickers, twist ties, rubber bands, and containers before composting.
- **When in doubt, leave it out.** If you're unsure whether an item is compostable, it's better to dispose of it properly than risk contaminating compost.

