

## **Compostable Bags FAQ**

### **Why did York Region allow plastic bags as liners in the Green Bin program?**

In 2005, the Green Bin program was launched in York Region to provide residents with a convenient option to divert organic materials. Plastic bags were initially accepted in the Green Bin to encourage residents to participate in the program and address the “yuck” factor associated with food waste. Residents across the Region responded enthusiastically to the Green Bin program through high levels of participation. With a strong program now in place, we’re moving forward to make our program even more successful and environmentally-friendly.

### **Are compostable bags mandatory?**

Yes, the use of compostable bags is mandatory for households receiving Green Bin curbside collection. All municipalities, with the exception of the City of Markham, have amended their bylaws to state compostable bags are mandatory.

### **Do compostable bags break down during composting?**

Yes, however degradation rates have been lower than anticipated to date. York Region’s processors employ processes which focus on effective management of plastic in the organics stream, including bags, diapers and sanitary products. The current priority for the contracted processing facilities is to remove plastics from the Green Bin stream to create a valuable compost end product. York Region staff are currently working with processors to pilot methods to increase compostable bag degradation rates.

### **Why should I use compostable bags if they aren’t fully breaking down at this time?**

Compostable bags represent a better environmental option for the Green Bin program because they are made with natural materials such as corn starch and biodegradable polymers, whereas plastic bags are derived from non-renewable fossil fuels. Compostable bags are designed to degrade and represent an environmentally-friendly alternative to bags made from fossil fuels.

### **If compostable bags are mandatory, why aren’t they being enforced?**

To date, transitioning to mandatory use of compostable bags has achieved some success for the Region. It significantly increased compostable bag use while maintaining high Green Bin participation rates. Future changes to the Green Bin program need to be carefully considered to maintain this successful balance. While curbside enforcement may be seen as a logical next step to increase program compliance, it has the potential to alienate Green Bin users and requires additional resources at the local level which may increase collection contract costs. As a result, enforcement is not recommended at this time.

### **How will the Region drive use of compostable bags?**

York Region residents have been participating in the Green Bin program for eight years and using plastic bags has become an engrained habit for many. Changing this behavior is challenging, and York Region will promote environmental benefits of compostable bags to provide residents with a reason to switch. Current program data indicates 28 per cent of the bags used to line the Green Bin are compostable.

### **Have compostable bags resulted in a decrease in process residue rates?**

To date, residue rates have not decreased as a result of implementing mandatory compostable bags due to low use and degradation rates. Changes in processing operations have the potential to decrease residue rates but may also result in increased cost due to longer retention time, impacting the Region's overall program costs. Orgaworld, one of the Region's processors, is committed to working with the Region to optimize their processes to balance compostable bag degradation, residue rates and cost to meet the Region's objectives.

### **How much do compostable bags cost?**

The cost of the bag is dependent on the retailer, bag size and brand. In York Region, the cost for compostable bags designed to fit the small kitchen container may range from 10 cents to 30 cents per bag and bags to line the tall Green Bin may range in price from 27 cents to 60 cents per bag. Although there is a cost for compostable bags, they provide a sustainable alternative to plastic bags, which are no longer free from many grocers and retailers.

A tall Green Bin can hold approximately six small compostable bags or one large compostable bag. For example, if a household sets out one full bin per week (and chooses a lower cost brand), the cost of using six small bags or one large compostable bag per week is estimated at \$0.60 per week or roughly \$32 per year.

### **Why don't retailers sell compostable shopping bags?**

Loblaws and York Region partnered to deliver a pilot program offering compostable shopping bags in five stores across the Region as an alternative to plastic carry-out bags. This pilot launched on September 15, 2012 and operated for approximately 15 weeks. Compostable shopping bags provided a dual purpose of a shopping bag and a compostable Green Bin liner bag. Despite these advantages, data provided by Loblaws indicated that uptake rates of compostable shopping bags were lower than anticipated, with approximately 2.5 per cent of shoppers who purchased a shopping bag choosing the compostable option. The pilot has been completed.

### **Do I need to line my Green Bin at all?**

Due to the nature of some of the materials collected in the Green Bin and to meet health and safety regulations, most municipalities require that the organics be contained in a bag. Please contact your local municipality to see if there are alternative options available for your area.

**Will there be more odours with compostable bags?**

The organic material you are collecting in the compostable bag is the same material you were collecting in plastic bags. As with any bag, if organic waste is left too long it may produce an odour. It is recommended that you empty your in-house kitchen container regularly.

**Do compostable bags break down while in the kitchen container?**

If the bags are used regularly and not left to sit for long periods, they are very durable. Curbside collection is weekly, so this should not be an issue. As compostable bags are made to breathe and plastic is not, you may find that your container will gather some moisture or condensation. To help absorb potential moisture, line the bottom of your bin with paper towel or newspaper before placing your compostable bag inside.

**Does York Region accept diapers and sanitary products?**

Yes. York Region accepts diapers and sanitary waste as both contain significant amounts of organic material. Weekly pickup of these materials is also appreciated by residents when compared to bi-weekly garbage collection.

Diapers bagged in plastic film such as the plastic used in the Diaper Genie are not acceptable in the Green Bin. We strongly encourage residents to place their diapers in the Green Bin using a compostable bag.

**Do I need to use compostable bags for pet waste? Are they strong enough?**

Yes, compostable bags are required for pet waste. Compostable bags are very durable and can handle a significant amount of kitty litter and are strong enough to support pet waste when picking up after your pet.

**What happens to the plastic bags that are removed from the compost?**

Plastic bags removed from the compost are sent for disposal, often to a landfill or an energy-from-waste facility. The garbage in a landfill is exposed to little air, water or light as the layers are covered daily to reduce odour. Without exposure to these elements, there is very little decomposition. In fact, much of the waste is preserved in this environment. Scientists currently estimate that it will take one thousand years for a plastic bag to break down in a landfill. Energy from waste facilities recover energy in the form of heat and electricity from the residual waste being treated.

Reference: <http://www.plastics.ca/EnvironmentalSustainability/RetentionLandfill/index.php>

**What if I stop using my Green Bin and place my organics in the garbage?**

Waste in landfills is exposed to little air, water or light as the layers are covered daily to reduce odour. This creates an anaerobic environment (no oxygen). When organic waste breaks down in an anaerobic environment it generates methane gas. Methane gas is a greenhouse gas, 21 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Therefore, the most environmentally-friendly option for organic waste is to compost it. If you choose not to use your Green Bin, consider using a backyard composter instead as this is the best alternative.

**What do I use for my extra Green Bin material? May I use clear plastic bags for this?**

Compostable bags come in two sizes, one for the small kitchen container and one for the tall Green Bin. Check with your local municipality to determine if extra materials are permitted to be left in a bag beside the Green Bin. If so, please ensure it is in a compostable bag.

**Are there other options for composting besides using the Green Bin?**

Backyard composting is a great alternative to using the Green Bin for your fruit and vegetable waste. It not only allows you to aid in the diversion of organic waste from landfill, it can also be used as a soil amendment for your lawn and gardens. Please note, the Green Bin program accepts materials not recommended for backyard composting such as diapers, pet waste, sanitary products, bones and meat.

Contact your local municipality to see if there are other alternative options available for your area.

**Where can I go for more information?**

Residents can visit [www.york.ca/waste](http://www.york.ca/waste) for more information on the compostable bag program and other York Region waste management programs and services.

**NOTE:** Following committee, this document will be circulated to our local municipal partners and call centre staff to ensure consistent messaging across the Region.