What are biodegradable plastics?
The need for a clarified terminology

The discussion around bioplastics is often confused by misleading terminology, which covers various types of materials that behave differently, hence they must be considered differently.

**Compostable plastics**

Compostable plastics have to meet certain requirements, which are defined by specific standards. Most common is the EU standard EN 13432, which is quite widely used as a reference. The key requirement is that the plastic should be compostable in industrial conditions: compostable plastics that meet set criteria, carry specific labels, and are validated by a neutral third party. Some examples:

**Bio-based plastic**

Plastic where the fossil source is replaced with a biological one (meaning it can behave like regular plastic and should preferably go to recycling or be disposed of). This refers to sources, not to end-of-life behavior. The properties of bio-based plastics can vary a lot depending on the material. Some bio-based plastics can be biodegradable (e.g. polylactic acid - PLA), but not all.

**Bioplastic**

May mean either bio-based or biodegradable; it is a confusing term, and needs further clarification, therefore:

we do not recommend using this term.

**Oxo-degradable plastic**

A specific case is oxo-degradable plastic (sometimes misleadingly called oxo-biodegradable) – neither bio-based nor biodegradable, but simply breaks into smaller fragments (hence, it can end up as microplastic). They may hamper both recycling and composting; hence we do not support them. The EU is also moving to restrict/ban these.

Some confusing terms or materials which can be misleading:

**How to recognise compostable plastic?**

Some examples of where compostable plastic makes sense:

**Compostable bags** to make separate collection of organics more user-friendly and maximise captures, above all (but not only) in urban areas

**Compostable tableware** in conditions where reusable is not possible (e.g. outdoor festivals with no dishwashers)

**Compostable coffee capsules** if traditional coffee-making is not possible (e.g. many offices)

Some specific fruit & vegetable **wrappers** as a transitional plan while moving towards package-free shops

**Disaster relief operations**

Want to know more? Read the full info sheet prepared by Let’s Do it Foundation

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