



## Let's Eliminate Plastic Yard Waste Bags

Joining several neighboring communities in the D.C. Metro Area that have banned the use of plastic bags for yard waste, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors amended the county's Solid Waste Management ordinance to prohibit the use of plastic bags for set out and collection of yard waste.

The change, which took effect on March 1, 2021, requires county residents who have curbside collection of yard waste to use reusable containers or paper yard waste bags to set out grass, leaves and brush. The Solid Waste Management Program did not begin enforcing the new rule until April 19, 2021 to allow time for customer notification and education.

A number of environmental and conservation organizations, including the Audubon Naturalist Society, 350Fairfax and the Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions have voiced their support of the change.

"Eliminating single-use plastic bags that otherwise get shredded and mixed into compost, contaminating our soils, water, and eventually us, just makes sense. We concur with the Board's decision to make this change, and we're glad to see Fairfax County finally joining its neighbors in the region to do this," said Renee Grebe, Northern Virginia Conservation Advocate with the Audubon Naturalist Society.

Local collection crews report that people are making the change away from plastic bags. According to Conrad Mehan, Fairfax County Solid Waste Complex Manager, "most of our customers have embraced this change – we see a lot more reusable containers and paper bags, and fewer plastic bags. This has tremendously improved the quality of the yard waste for recycling so that very little must be disposed of due to plastic contamination. For the few customers who may have not realized the change, we have left notes on the trash carts for them, and our Customer Service team has engaged them to explain the guidelines."

Most lawncare experts state that the best practice for dealing with cut grass is to leave it on the lawn to retain moisture and nutrients. A healthy lawn will be less susceptible to pests and weeds. Backyard composting is another great way to manage leaves, grass, and food scraps. The reusable containers vary from collapsible drums to repurposed trash cans. You should check with your collector – they may have restrictions on what they can collect. If none of those options work for you, paper yard waste bags may be the best option. The bags are available at all the garden supply locations, grocery stores, and from online retailers.

Residential yard waste in paper bags or reusable containers will be accepted at the I-95 Landfill Complex and the I-66 Transfer Station. As of April 19, 2021, yard waste in plastic bags delivered to these facilities will be rejected. Commercial yard waste loads containing plastic bags delivered after April 19, 2021 will be subject to the unacceptable material or “penalty” rate, currently \$100/ton.

## Are Biodegradable or Compostable Plastic Bags an Option?

With the ban on plastic bags for yard waste, you may be considering biodegradable or compostable plastic bags. Here’s a bit of insight into why biodegradable plastic bags are not allowed to be used for yard waste set-out. During our research and analysis leading up to the policy change, SWMP staff looked into biodegradable plastic bags, but decided that they did not meet our requirements for several reasons.

To begin with, there are many types of biodegradable and compostable “plastic” bags, made using different technologies. “Biodegradable” in this context does not mean the same thing as “compostable.” In fact, the plastic bag manufacturers are still working on industry standards for biodegradability and compostability. Paper yard waste bags, in contrast, are manufactured to a defined standard and perform consistently.

The “alternative” plastic bags decompose at differing rates and, for many of the technologies, the bags don’t decompose completely for many years. In some cases, the bags never decompose entirely, being reduced to microscopic chips of plastic that degrade the quality of the finished compost. These microplastics end up in our waterways and ultimately introduced into the food chain. In other cases, the bags are so fragile that they begin to decompose before you bring them to the curb.

Also, it would be difficult for busy collection crews to quickly decide if a bag were made of compostable plastic or regular trash-bag plastic. In the confusion, we could end up with the banned bags continuing to be included in the yard waste, or biodegradable bags being left uncollected.

In the future, we may find other feasible options for containing and collecting yard waste. That’s why the code has been rewritten to make adding other container types (as technologies improve) a relatively quick and easy administrative matter. But until you hear otherwise *from the County*, let’s stick with reusable containers or paper yard waste bags for now.

Care after  
you wear

Throw away  
your mask—in  
the trash—  
when you're  
done!



## Try Reusable Yard Waste Containers

Do you really need to bag your yard waste? Beside grass-cycling and backyard composting, many gardeners use a container to set out yard waste for collection. Buying bags can get expensive, so many Fairfax County residents repurpose an old trash can to set out yard waste.

How will your collector know that they old trash can holds yard waste, not trash? The best way is to decorate the can – simply label it YARD WASTE or decorate the can with paint, stencils, your house number, whatever you like. Here are a few examples:



## Sustainable Gardening

Yay Spring! We have learned that one of the most satisfying COVID-safe activities is gardening. The Fairfax County Solid Waste Management Program has some suggestions for making your gardening even greener.

## Plastic (Pots, Trays, Tags)

The big-box home centers will take plastic containers, including pots, hanging baskets and trays, as well as the little ID tags! Typically, you will see a **Recycle Here!** area near the garden center checkout area for customers to return plastic plant trays, pots and ID tags, regardless of condition (or where you bought it).

Curbside recycling programs are unable to accept these plastic plant containers because they cannot market that type of plastic. When you take unwanted plastic pots to a garden center they are collected and sorted. If they are reusable, they are sterilized and reused for new plants. If they are cracked or broken, then they are shredded and sent to a plastics re-manufacturer and recycled.



## Backyard Composting

If you haven't tried composting, what are you waiting for? There are many different ways to compost in your backyard – you can be as high-tech or low-tech as you like. Compost happens! [The Virginia Cooperative Extension](#) can help you find the best way to turn your yard waste (and maybe food scraps) into delicious compost for your garden.

## Mulch and Soil Bags

Plastic bags from soil, mulch, sand, seeds, dry fertilizers or bird seed are *not* recyclable in your curbside recycling program. And they are not clean enough for the grocery store plastic bag and film recycling program, so they should not go in there. Here are some ways to reuse those bags:

- For the compost pile: Store leaves in the fall for adding to your spring compost. It is important that the leaves are mostly dry when you place them in the bag; also poke a few small holes in the bag to create ventilation. In the spring when you start composting food scraps again, use the carbon-containing leaves (dry material) to mix in with the high nitrogen-containing food scraps (wet material), for a happy active compost.
- The plastic bags from garden products can also be reused in place of your garbage bags in order to “reuse” them at least once more.

## Fertilizer Containers

If you have unused and unwanted gardening chemicals, please take them to the free [Household Hazardous Waste Collection Area](#) at one of the Fairfax County facilities. Empty hard plastic bottles and jugs that contained liquid fertilizer (or even pesticides ... which hopefully you are using sparingly if at all) are recyclable in your curbside recycling program! Once the container is empty, triple rinse it by adding a little water, shaking and applying to the area that you originally put the product on. When empty completely, replace the cap and put it in the recycling bin.



## Hoses

Throw your old garden hose in the trash, NOT the recycling bin. Placing items like garden hoses, dog leashes, chains, ropes, hanging baskets, and other “tanglers” in the recycling damages the recycling sorting equipment.

## Seed Packets

Most seed packets are made of recyclable paper, but they can also be saved for reuse. You can reuse them to package the seeds you collect from your plants in the fall, or they can be laminated and stapled to sticks to mark rows in your garden.

## Other Ways to Cut Down on Waste:

- Recycle and reuse cardboard.
- Donate garden tools, vases, and other supplies.
- Reuse packing material whenever possible.
- Compost stems and other organic waste.
- Go for ‘greener’ items when you buy supplies.
- Buy only what you know you will use.

# Watch the Green Grow

Backyard composting is another way to use yard waste to return nutrients to your garden. However, dumping yard waste into forests is not the same as composting. Dumped yard waste breaks down much more slowly than plant material in a compost tumbler or hot compost pile. Dumped yard waste smothers native plants and can spread invasive plants in natural areas.

Thank you for helping to protect our environment. Visit the Watch the Green Grow webpage to learn more about green yard care practices and to record your green actions on the map: [Watch the Green Grow | Park Authority \(fairfaxcounty.gov\)](#)

*Tami Sheiffer is the Watch the Green Grow Coordinator for the Fairfax County Park Authority*

## Food Scrap Composting Update

The food scrap composting pilot at the two county facilities, the I-66 Transfer Station and the I-95 Landfill Complex is going very well! Since the program began in November 2020, we have collected over 20,000 pounds of food scraps. There are a couple of things that we have noticed that would help the program operate more efficiently:

1. Use the container closest to the entrance. Each site has several containers, but it is better to fill one up before moving to the next cart.
2. If you bring your food waste in a plastic bag, we now have a container at the Transfer Station site for used bags. This is not for recycling – bags covered in food residue are not recyclable.
3. Tell your friends and neighbors! We want to get as many people involved as possible!

There are plans to expand the current pilot to include a few farmers markets this summer. We think it will be convenient to drop off food scraps while you're out buying fresh produce. What do you think?

## Are you looking for a speaker?

The Solid Waste Management Program has a team of outreach specialists that would love to speak to your garden club, HOA meeting, or civic association! Everyone has questions about recycling – and we try to have answers! While your group might not be meeting in person these days, we would be happy to set up a virtual meeting – or join yours. Please contact the outreach team at [recycling@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:recycling@fairfaxcounty.gov) for more information.

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