

# Office Kitchen Composting Guide

Are you interested in composting more? Kitchen composting may be available for your department! Email [zerowaste@umich.edu](mailto:zerowaste@umich.edu) with questions or to get started!

## HOW: Step by Step Set-up: Kitchen Composting

- **Step 1: Contact [zerowaste@umich.edu](mailto:zerowaste@umich.edu).** We'll do a kitchen walk-thru to determine appropriate bins and service to be provided.
- **Step 2: Figure out logistics.** For the counter-top bin, how will the compost get from the kitchen to the cart (usually on the dock)? For standard bins, how will compostables be ordered (if needed)? Where will the bin and signage be placed?
- **Step 3: Let your whole office know!** Send an all staff email. The Zero Waste Program team can host a short, informative all-staff training to answer any questions.
- **Step 4: Set-up!** Remove all non-compostable disposables from the kitchen. Set-up bins and signage. Transition standard orders of materials to compostable and bulk options.
- **Step 5: Maintenance.** Re-order supplies and monitor system for contamination and communicate with office as needed. Onboard new employees.

## WHAT: What is compostable?

Compostable items include food waste and disposables specially made to break-down into a soil-like substance in a short period of time. This compost is then used as a soil amendment and fertilizer to grow new food and create healthy soil!

YES	NO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coffee grounds (w/ most filters)</li> <li>• Bamboo coffee stirrers</li> <li>• Teabags (unless silky-plastic, staples ok)</li> <li>• All food waste (including bones, dairy)</li> <li>• Napkins &amp; paper towels</li> <li>• Disposable dishware marked “<b>compostable</b>” such as cups, plates, and flatware (must be marked COMPOSTABLE, not BIODEGRADABLE)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sugar packet wrappers</li> <li>• Wrappers from sub sandwich shops, cliff bars, etc.</li> <li>• Paper coffee cups (unless marked “compostable”)</li> <li>• Paper cartons (juice, half-n-half)</li> <li>• Stickers (remove from fruit peels)</li> <li>• Teabag wrappers</li> </ul>

**WHY?** It is estimated that 37% of what we at U-M currently send to landfill is compostable, even from office buildings – not just those with food service locations. When we compost, this waste goes towards creating healthy soil and food system instead of filling up limited space in landfills and trapping nutrients and resources.

**Importance of Education:** In compost collection, any contamination (such as plastic wrap or plastic-lined cups) can disrupt the process and threaten our ecosystems. Therefore, it is important to have champions like yourself and hold trainings for staff in offices which start composting to clarify guidelines pre-collection.



## Office Kitchen Composting – More Information

### Counter-Top Bin: For Coffee Grounds



**Tip:** Place near coffee maker. Change filter once every 3-4 months. In new spaces, the filter alleviates concerns about odors.

If you aren't ready to make the full switch to kitchen composting yet, many offices start by composting just coffee grounds. We'll provide a green 3-gallon countertop compost bin where coffee grounds, filters, and the occasional banana peels can be placed. Most kitchens start with this option and move into full composting once the office is comfortable with the process.

**Departmental staff are responsible for emptying this bin and bringing contents to the compost cart on the dock.**

*Liners needed: 3-gallon  
M-Marketsite: BBC Distributing #10458000*

### Standard Bin: All Compostable Waste (\*including coffee grounds)



**Tip:** Place near matching recycling/landfill bins. If contamination is an issue, place slightly apart to distinguish as a new option.

If your office would like to switch to full composting, our staff will work with you to eliminate possible contaminants from your space and re-stock with compostable disposables if needed. We will provide a full-size bin, which matches U-M new waste bin standard (see: above right). Your office will be responsible for providing compostable or reusable items after the initial switch.

**Custodial Services will empty the full-size bin as part of their regular schedule. They will provide liners for regular kitchen use. Extras for events can be ordered through M-Marketsite.**

*Liners needed: 33-gallon  
M-Marketsite: BBC Distributing #10458100*

## Making the Switch: Sustainable Choices

Zero-Waste is the conscious effort to move towards less waste in an event or location. This includes looking at purchasing options to reduce packaging waste, encouraging use of reusable items over disposable when possible, and recycling or composting any waste which is produced. Some common changes are:

Current/Common: Go to Landfill	Zero Waste Alternative
Disposable plates, paper cups & flatware	Best: shared reusable dishes & flatware Better: compostable disposables
Plastic coffee stirrers	Best: Use reusable spoons Better: Bamboo stirrers (compostable)
Creamer packets	Bulk creamer
Coffee pods (e.g. – K-cups)	Best: Bulk coffee Better: Compostable options
Sweetener packets	Bulk sugar and other sweeteners

Also consider:

- Switching to washable dish towels instead of paper towels.
- All paper towels and napkins are compostable, but consider buying recycled-content paper towels for an even greater impact.
- If you cannot switch out an item, please make sure to communicate to your staff that the existing item must go in landfill (e.g. – empty sugar packets).
- The packets teabags are wrapped in must go to landfill, but the teabags themselves (including the staple) are compostable.

## Common Contaminants Brought In

*Staff, faculty, and students will bring in the occasional non-compostable items even to the best stocked kitchen. Below is a list of items which cannot be composted. Unless otherwise noted, they must be sent to **landfill**. Please remind your office if needed:*

- Stickers on fruit
- Paper cups (not labeled COMPOSTABLE) – such as regular coffee cups, fountain drink cups
- Wrappers of any kind – such as from granola bars, chip bags, candy wrappers, condiment packets, wrappers for teabags, sugar packets, sub sandwich wrappers, or plastic wrap
- Items labeled “Biodegradable.” NOT the same as “compostable”
- Paper cartons (milk, broth, soup, half-and-half) – these can be **recycled**
- Paper bags or take-out containers not labeled “compostable.” Unsoiled paper bags can be **recycled**.
- Plastic-tipped toothpicks
- Foil (can be **recycled**)
- Wipes (cleaning wipes, wet-naps)
- Gum
- Liquids (put down drain. Too many liquids will break the compostable liner)



## Troubleshooting

- **Dirty Counter-Top Bin** –Here are our recommendations for cleaning if needed: (1) Wipe out in the sink with dishsoap or vinegar & water. (2) If the bag was leaking or tore, try double-lining the bags or taking the compost out more frequently. You can leave one bag in permanently (or until it is damaged/dirty) and take the second bag out normally with the compost. You may also want to remind colleagues not to throw liquids in the compost bin (which are more likely to weaken or seep-through the liner)
- **Fruit Flies** – If you did not have fruit flies previously with your trash bin, it is unlikely they will appear with the compost bin. If fruit flies do appear you can set-out a dish with vinegar and a drop of dish soap to attract and trap them or try a commercially-sold fruit fly trap. To mitigate the issue in the future you can try (1) taking the compost out more frequently, (2) add a lid to the compost bin (contact [zerowaste@umich.edu](mailto:zerowaste@umich.edu) for one).
- **Odor** – additional odors should not develop in your compost bin if it wasn't a problem in your landfill bin. However, if they arise you can (1) changing the carbon filter in your countertop bin, (2) take the compost out more frequently, (3) identify problem items and ask those items not be placed in the compost, such as liquids or fish, or (4) if you have small quantities of compost, you can put the small bin in the freezer.
- **Contamination** – If you are seeing contamination in your kitchen compost bin you can (1) send an email out with clarification (ex: "Just a reminder –sugar packets can't go in our compost bin. Please place in the trash."), (2) add a note to the signage directly addressing the offending items, (3) place the compost bin next to a landfill bin so no extra effort is needed for individuals to throw trash in the appropriate bin. If contamination continues to be an issue, consider putting the compost in a less accessible spot (cabinet, with a lid) so only people engaged will seek out the bin and are less likely to accidentally add contaminants.

## Responding to Questions

- Will there be odors or pest problems?

*No, unless they were there previously. The waste generated is waste which was already present – paper plates, napkins, lunch scrap, etc., but is just being put into a separate bin. As long as the bin is emptied on a regular basis (same as trash and recycling) there should not be odor or pest issues. In the smaller bins, the filter should be changed every 3 months.*

- Aren't there health concerns?

*No. As above, the items collected for compost are items which are already in your existing waste stream. As long as the bin is emptied regularly and guidelines are followed, there should be no additional health concerns. Companies, organizations, health systems, schools, and even entire cities are composting their food waste.*

- Why are we switching to composting? The old way worked just fine.

*Food and associated waste (plates, cups, napkins, etc.) account for 30-40% of our total waste stream! In order to conserve resources and reach our campus sustainability goal, we must divert our food waste away from the landfill.*