

So many of us enjoy tea daily but feel a bit of guilt about tossing tea bags or loose-leaf tea into the trash. With tea being a natural plant product, it feels like there is something that can be done with the spent leaves that would be more beneficial to the environment. Composting offers a great solution, but what about the tea bags that your favorite tea is packaged in? Can those be safely tossed in the composting bin too?

The tea inside tea bags is always compostable in most circumstances, but the tea bags can be another issue. Some can be composted, but some aren't compatible with composting based on the materials the tea bags are made with.

Compostable Vs. Non-Compostable Tea Bags

On the surface, many teabags look as though they're made of paper or biodegradable fibers, but a closer look tells us that many of them also contain at least a small amount of plastics, either in the construction of the tea bags themselves or in a thin layer that lines the inside of the teabag, where the plastic is usually less noticeable.

Unfortunately, many companies haven't yet made a move to fully compostable tea bags. It's estimated that more than a quarter of commercial tea bags contain a material called polypropylene. This is a type of thermoplastic polymer that is used in a variety of manufacturing industries. Polypropylene is not highly compatible with your composting bin.

There are other types of plastics and non-composable materials used in tea bags as well. However, all hope is not lost. More tea companies are moving toward more environmentally friendly and healthier materials for their teabags.

Generally speaking, you can technically put non-compostable tea bags into your compost bin. The biggest issue here is that you'll need to sift through your compost and fish out the non-compostable waste.

This is a bit of a hassle and one that most people choose not to endure. There is also a possibility of contaminating your compost with plastic byproducts, though the effects or actual likelihood of this haven't been thoroughly researched.

Teabags are more complex in design and construction than most people realize. To accurately determine if your tea bags are fully compostable, you have to look at all the different components that go into making a teabag.

What Are Tea Bags Made Of?

To understand whether your tea bags are compostable, there are four main components of tea bag construction that you need to look at. The first is the tea bag itself. Additionally, you want to look at the adhesives that keep the tea bag sealed, the strings and tags, how they're attached, and then finally, the contents inside the tea bag.

Tea Bag Materials

Teabags can be constructed from several different types of materials. The most compost-friendly types of teabag materials are organic filter paper and silk. Filter paper materials are made from plant material, such as hemp, and break down easily when added to your compost bin.

Silk is another type of material used and is surprisingly compost-friendly. Silk tea bags became quite popular several years ago but have become less common in recent years. The trick with silk tea bags is to be sure that they're not just plastic materials in disguise.

True silk tea bags are rather expensive to produce and typically reserved for premium, more expensive teas. There are also silken tea bags that are made out of plant-based material. These types of tea bags are generally safe for your compost bin.

Cotton is also becoming a more popular option, but you're more likely to see these types of tea bags sold separately for loose-leaf tea. Durable cotton tea bags can be reused instead of tossed into the trash.

Plastic tea bags are not biodegradable or compost-friendly. Teabags made of plastic mesh usually have a bit of a sheen to them, making them easier to spot. However, there are also "blends" that use a combination of plant materials or filter paper, along with plastic. These types of tea bags can be more difficult to identify.

If you're not sure of what your tea bags are made of, reaching out to the company's customer service center is always an option.

While many tea companies are continually changing their packaging and design, these are just a few of the companies today that are currently making a move to eliminate plastic in their teabags.

- PG Tips
- Twinings (pyramid bags)
- Traditional Medicinals
- Republic of Tea
- Stash
- Yogi Tea
- Numi Tea
- Pukka

Please note that it's best to contact the company directly regarding whether or not their teabags contain non-compostable materials since packaging may change frequently.

Tea Bag Sealants and Closures

It seems like such a tiny detail considering how small tea bags are, but if you're looking for a truly compostable tea bag, you have to consider the sealants used to keep the tea bag closed.

There seems to be a move toward tea companies using tea bags that are simply folded over and not sealed at all. This is great from an ecological perspective, as it means there are no extra chemicals to prevent you from tossing the bag into your compost bin.

The only downside to these types of tea bags is that you have to be careful when steeping and removing the tea bag, as the contents can more easily slip out.

Other tea bags used a type of glue or sealant to keep the bags shut. Many of these sealants contain polypropylene. In general, polypropylene isn't considered a compost-friendly material, mainly because it takes a long time to degrade.

You're not going to do your compost any harm by adding a tea bag sealed with polypropylene into the mix, but it's not going to break down the quickest either.

Another method used to seal tea bags is a cotton string that can be tied, sort of like a little pouch. If the strings are made from cotton, then they can also be added to your compost bin without worry.

Tea Bag Strings and Tags

The last component to consider is whether your tea bag features a tag or string attached. As mentioned above, if the string is made of cotton, this really isn't a concern for your compost bin, although it won't break down super-fast.

Paper is also generally considered safe for the compost bin, as long as it isn't glossy or highly pigmented. Most tea bag tags are acceptable for compost, but it is possible to come across one that isn't.

Finally, there are those little staples that are used to attach the tags or the strings to the teabag. Most agree that the staples are tiny enough that they won't cause any harm to your compost. The worst that will happen is that they'll rust a little, which won't negatively affect the quality of your compost. If you're concerned, you can always remove the little staple and dispose of it.

Tea Bag Contents

One thing to keep in mind, even if you're frustrated that your tea bags aren't compostable, is that the tea inside always is. The contents of your tea bags are filled with nutrient-dense goodness that's perfect for your compost bin. So, regardless of what your tea bags are made of, take a minute to open up your tea bag and dump the contents into the compost bin before tossing the tea bag itself.

What Is PLA?

PLA is a solution that more tea companies are turning to in order to reduce their reliance on plastic in their teabags. PLA is considered a type of plastic, but it doesn't fit the definition of plastic that most of us think.

PLA isn't made with any petroleum products and, as a result, will not leach all of those nasty byproducts into your cup of tea.

PLA is made from a type of plant-based material known as polylactic acid (which is shortened to PLA to keep things simple). PLA material is created by taking plant-based sources and breaking down the starches, or sugars, in them.

This process removes plant DNA from the material. This part might not seem like a big deal to some, but for those with allergies or sensitivities, it's very important.

What results from this process is a durable, plant-based polymer that can be used for a variety of applications.

You can now find “plastic” cups that are made from PLA, as well as soup containers, along with other types of convenience food packaging.

One of the important benefits of PLA, whether it's in your tea bags or other types of products, is that it's compostable. You can add PLA-containing tea bags to your compost container without the worry of the materials contaminating your compost or needing to be sifted out due to not breaking down.,

Why So Many Tea Companies Use Plastic in Their Tea Bags

In modern times, it's not at all uncommon to find tea bags that contain plastic or other materials that you might not be so fond of having with your tea. The tea bag seems like a very simple design, with a folded, porous pouch to hold the tea leaves while steeping.

However, tea companies have an interest in using materials that are both durable and provide a quality user experience. If it's something that inexpensive to produce, then that's even better for the manufacturer.

This is how plastic became so popular in tea bags. Plastic is durable, so tea bags made with plastic are more likely to withstand the rigorous packaging and shipping processes and still be completely intact once they find their way to your teacup.

Plastic tea bags are also practically indestructible once they're submerged in hot water. They work well for containing the tea without tea leaves wandering loose in your cup.

While many tea lovers are perfectly content with a less than perfect tea experience, manufacturers worry that tea bags that lose some of their contents either in transit or within a cup will reflect poorly upon the brand name. In essence, plastic is neat and tidy and offers a positive aesthetic for the brand, even if plastic isn't the best for the environment or the body.

As greater awareness of the environmental impact of plastics has grown, and consumers have begun demanding fewer plastics in their products, more tea companies have turned to biodegradable materials. They've moved toward replacing plastic in tea bags altogether, or at least toward using plant-based plastic materials like PLA.

Is Tea Good for Compost?

Tea is an organic plant material that is wonderful for your compost container. Tea adds lots of valuable nutrients to your compost, including potassium, phosphorus, and nitrogen, among others. Tea is great for adding balance to your compost mix, especially for balancing carbon-rich compost material.

Adding freshly steeped but cooled tea bags to your compost can help improve the moisture levels, making it a more suitable environment for compost-friendly creatures like earthworms. Whether or not your tea bags can be composted, the tea itself is perfect for creating nutrient-rich compost.

Even if you don't have a compost system at home, taking your used tea material and scattering it in your garden, potted plants or house plants will only benefit the soil, infusing it with nutrients that are beneficial for your plants.

Composting With Tea

The next time you finish an enjoyable cup of tea, consider composting your tea bag instead of tossing it. The tea leaves are nutrient-rich and wonderful for soil. Look for compost-friendly tea bags, or better yet, choose loose-leaf teas that can be brewed with an infuser or reusable tea bag.