

Saturday, July 14, 2007 - 12:00 AM

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## EcoConsumer

# Is food waste next on our recycle chain?

**By Tom Watson**

*Special to The Seattle Times*

The next frontier of recycling may look very familiar.

Like that bagel you couldn't quite finish at breakfast, for example. Or the pasta salad turning into a science project in the back of your refrigerator.

Food scraps and food-soiled paper make up more than 30 percent of residential solid waste in King County. In a landfill, food scraps produce methane, a greenhouse gas 23 times more powerful than carbon dioxide. Since these organic materials also have high value as compost, residential food-waste collection is a natural next step for the recycling movement. The city of Seattle may even make it mandatory in 2009.

The Seattle region has already piled up acclaim as a national leader in household food-waste collection. So you probably know that in many local communities, you can put food scraps and food-soiled paper in your yard-waste collection bin.

But plenty of food waste still lands in the garbage.

To make the most of your food scraps, follow these tips:

- **Get the scoop about your service.** As with other types of recycling, different rules exist for food-waste collection depending on where you live. The King County Web site [www.recyclefood.com](http://www.recyclefood.com) provides information about all programs in the county that allow food-waste recycling with yard waste. Outside of King County, check with your yard-waste hauler.

While most programs in King County allow you to include meat and dairy products, some don't. If you have yard-waste (with food scraps) collection every two weeks, such as in Seattle, you cannot include those items at this time. But if you receive weekly collection, you can toss in meat and dairy, including

bones and fish.

All food scraps collected with yard waste in the Seattle area go to Cedar Grove Composting, a private company that operates large processing facilities in Maple Valley and Everett. With its high-temperature composting and state-of-the-art covered piles, Cedar Grove can handle meat and dairy just fine.

The reason for the different rules is that Seattle-King County Public Health does not want meat and dairy to sit in a home yard-waste container for two weeks. However, in some places with every-two-weeks collection, such as Bellingham, they do accept meat and dairy. Public officials are working on this issue.

- **Say no to plastic-coated paper.** Food-soiled paper such as napkins and greasy pizza boxes should not go in your regular recycling bin, but you can include it with your food and yard waste. Most bread products can be recycled with your yard waste.

Until recently, Cedar Grove said it was OK to put food scraps in a paper milk carton and put that in your yard waste. But now Cedar Grove has determined that anything with a glossy plastic coating — such as milk cartons, most paper cups and many types of paper plates — should not go into the yard-waste bin.

Cedar Grove sells its compost products widely, even at major chain stores. It needs to keep plastic out, to maintain a high-quality product. If you can't tell whether a paper plate or cup has a plastic coating, remember: "When in doubt, throw it out."

- **Work your system.** If you want everyone in your household to recycle food waste, you need a simple, practical system. Reuse a large plastic Tupperware-type container for food scraps in the kitchen. Or consider buying a compost pail or crock designed for this purpose, available for \$20 and up.

To find containers online, search for "kitchen-compost pails." The Seattle store Goods for the Planet and several area kitchen stores offer a stainless-steel model for \$40. The cities of Bellevue, Issaquah, Kirkland and Redmond offer plastic kitchen-compost containers to residents at no charge, by request.

Biodegradable plastic bags may soon be an option. So far, Cedar Grove has approved their use only in Issaquah, where the city promotes these bags. You can also collect food scraps in a paper bag or newspaper and put the whole bundle in the yard-waste bin.

If fruit flies gravitate to your kitchen-compost container, drain out the liquid on the bottom (which attracts them), or empty the container more often.

- **Keep the home piles turning.** Since home composting doesn't require transportation and processing,

it reduces global warming even more than Cedar Grove-style large-scale composting. I bury my coffee grounds and vegetable trimmings in my home compost bin, under the leaves and grass. My garden loves the final product.

- **Eat it, don't toss it.** You can take the biggest bite out of global warming, and save money, if you simply produce less food waste. Jonathan Bloom of Chapel Hill, N.C., a food-waste expert and writer, offers these tips: Make a shopping list and stick to it (impulse buys often end up uneaten); don't shop hungry; remember to eat your leftovers.

*The EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at [tom.watson@metrokc.gov](mailto:tom.watson@metrokc.gov) or 206-296-4481. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at [www.KCecoconsumer.com](http://www.KCecoconsumer.com).*

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