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## Don't get left holding the wrong leaf bag

If you're a Twin Cities resident living anywhere except Minneapolis, you now must use biodegradable, compostable lawn bags. The once-ubiquitous black plastic bags have been banned for yard waste.

By **JOHN EWOLDT**, Star Tribune

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"Why haven't I heard of this change before?" asked a Hennepin County resident when she called Hennepin County Environmental Services about the switch to compostable bags. John Jaimez, the county's organics recycling specialist, said the change was mentioned frequently last year in newspaper, radio and TV stories as well as online. "I don't have a TV or computer or read the newspaper," she said.

For anyone else sitting on the sidelines, here's the deal. As of Jan. 1, most residents of the seven-county metro area (Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott and Washington counties) who bag their yard waste for pickup must use compostable

paper or plastic-like bags made from organic material, often corn-based. Only Minneapolis residents are getting a pass on the new requirement -- until Jan. 1, 2013.

Metro procrastinators who bagged leaves after the last pickup in the fall will have to rebag the waste or find other options. Waste haulers are giving no slack to anyone putting out the black plastic bags. Most haulers, such as Allied Waste, are tagging the black bags with a neon-colored note which states that they will no longer be picked up, said Jessica Kliche, marketing coordinator at Allied.

Earlier-than-expected warm weather caught some retailers off guard. The compostable bags have been in short supply at some stores.

In a check of 10 retailers two weeks ago, Sam's Club and Wal-Mart in Bloomington were out of stock. Target, Menards, Home Depot, Costco and several smaller hardware stores had the paper or plastic-like bags in stock.

You might need help finding compostable bags if you're shopping for the first time. Many stores have the paper bags in one location and the plastic-like bags in another. Target, for example, has the traditional black

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lawn and leaf bags with all other plastic bags but the compostable ones in the seasonal department.

For a partial list of retailers selling the plastic-like bags, go to [www.bpiworld.org/minnesota](http://www.bpiworld.org/minnesota). More than 30 manufacturers make the translucent, compostable bags, said Steve Mojo, executive director of the Biodegradable Products Institute in New York City.

### Finding the right bags

How can consumers know they're buying the correct ones?

The new bags are translucent, usually white, green or pink. But don't be misled by packaging or wording.

Several stores were selling bags labeled "100 percent degradable" or "60 percent recycled plastic" in green boxes labeled "Go Green" or "Good Sense." Open the box, however, and the bags contain black or opaque green plastic that is not compostable.

Plastic bags labeled as being biodegradable but not compostable break down into finer plastic particles, but the plastic does not disintegrate into organic matter. Look instead

for wording on the box that says "compostable" or "Meets ASTM D6400 standards."

### Drawbacks to new bags

Anyone accustomed to bags made of thick, black plastic with drawstrings or flap closures will find the new bags a little, well, basic.

None of the brands I checked had the drawstring or flap closure or even twist ties. At a size of 30 to 33 gallons, they're also smaller than traditional bags, which are usually 39 to 45 gallons.

Sturdiness is a factor, too. The paper versions offer consistent quality, but the plastic-like bags have varying strengths due to the thickness of the material. Some of the boxes weren't labeled for thickness, which is measured in mils (1 to 1.1 thickness is standard). The Bag to Nature brand at Target was the strongest in our tests.

The new bags have some drawbacks. They are designed to disintegrate more quickly, so filling them with damp material and leaving them in the rain isn't a good idea. Decomposition time will depend on condition and the brand.

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## Finding a good price

They cost more, too. The old plastic 39- to 45-gallon leaf bags cost 17 to 40 cents each. The 30-gallon Kraft paper bags cost as much as 80 cents each. Home Depot and Menards were cheaper at 38 cents each (\$1.88 for five). The lowest price I found was at Costco for 32 cents each (\$7.99 for 25).

Among the stores where I found compostable, plastic-like bags, each sold a different brand. Prices ranged from 60 to 83 cents per 33-gallon bag. Menards had the lowest price on its BioBag (\$5.99 for 10), but Target's Bag to Nature bags were sturdier (\$7.96 for 10). If you're bagging sticks and branches, go for sturdier, thicker bags or use two-ply paper.

Despite all the confusion, Denise Westman of Tonka Bay said she's glad to be helping the environment.

"I think it's a great idea, but I am wondering how the bags will do in the rain," she said.

As for her stash of black plastic bags, Westman plans to use them to haul compost or use them as garbage bags.

"One way or another, they'll still get used," she said.

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If you spot a deal, share it at [www.startribune.com/blogs/dealspotter](http://www.startribune.com/blogs/dealspotter).

## Minneapolis gets extra time

Why is Minneapolis off the hook until 2013? The city is considering a program for residents to discard yard and food waste in carts. But it needs extra time to get the carts into place and find an organic recycler that is licensed to accept and handle the waste from 105,000 households, said city spokesman Casper Hill. Currently, there is no such recycler, he said.

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