A GUIDE TO SPOTTING
ZERO WASTE GREENWASHING

"Greenwashing" refers to the use of misleading labels, imagery, or designs to make a package or product seem more environmentally friendly than it is. Use Eco-Cycle's "Guide to Greenwashing" to know which labels, terms, and "certifications" are real, and which are not.

THESE TERMS ARE GREENWASHING:

BIODEGRADABLE when it appears on a plastic product (this is NOT greenwashing when referring to a liquid like laundry soap, for example)

This term often shows up on plastic bags, plastic personal-care packaging, and plastic cutlery, as well as many other types of plastic packaging. This is an unregulated term that means that the plastic will "break down" (NOT decompose) into smaller pieces of plastic called microplastics. Plastic never breaks down (at least within centuries) and "biodegradable" plastics cause microplastic pollution even more quickly than regular plastic products, better enabling plastics to get into our water, soils, and bodies. Plastics designed to "degrade" quicker were originally designed to decrease the probability of plastic litter killing wildlife, but this concept was quickly turned into a greenwashing tactic for many products to make consumers think the product is compostable or that it will just disappear in a landfill. This label can also be put on any product, since over enough time anything on earth is technically "biodegradable."

PHOTODEGRADABLE

This term is very similar to "biodegradable," and means a product is designed to break into microplastics when exposed to sunlight. Stretchy six-pack holders are "photodegradable," as well as many plastic bags. Most other stretchy plastic bags and films, while not recyclable in the regular "curbside" recycling, can be recycled in a separate hard-to-recycle collection, where they're generally turned into composite lumber/decking. However, photodegradable plastics can't be turned into decking since they're designed to fall apart in the sunlight. This is another unregulated term.

OXO-DEGRADABLE

This term follows the same concept as "photodegradable," but it refers to exposure to oxygen rather than sunlight.

PLANT-BASED

This isn't a meaningful term when it comes to packaging material—it usually implies it's made of some plant material, but not necessarily all. It could be plastic-coated cardboard, or a plastic made partly from plants (and partly from petroleum). It does NOT mean it's compostable, or plastic-free.

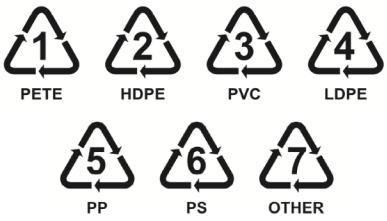
_% PLANT MATERIAL

This term is the same as "plant-based"—it's just more specific about how much of the material is plant-based. Again, not regulated or meaningful in terms of disposal.

RECYCLABLE, 100% RECYCLABLE, AND THE RECYCLING SYMBOL

Just like the rest, this term, as well as the recycling symbol (which you will see on almost every single plastic product, regardless of recyclability), are largely unregulated and not fully reliable. Whether something is recyclable depends on whether there is a market to buy it at a cost that covers the collection, processing, and transportation of the material and also a facility with capacity to sort the material. Those two factors change from place to place, so recycling guidelines change from place to place as well. Therefore, it's pretty tricky to label a product as "recyclable." Many products are hypothetically, physically recyclable, but unless a market exists that will buy it at a reasonable price and a facility can process it cost-effectively, these items are functionally not recyclable. Since the product doesn't know where you are, its label can't reliably tell you whether it's recyclable.

100% RECYCLABLE



A NOTE ON THE NUMBERS INSIDE THE RECYCLING SYMBOL

These numbers represent the plastic resin that the product is made from. For example, something made from polypropylene will have a 5 on the bottom since 5 is the code for polypropylene within the plastics industry. While some plastic resins tend to be more recyclable than others, there's no ironclad correlation between resin number and recyclability because the plastics industry makes each resin into so many different products, shapes, sizes, and durabilities.

ECO-FRIENDLY/EARTH-FRIENDLY

This label usually indicates pure greenwashing (aka no sustainability effort at all) because it's so vague. Unless it's accompanied by some meaningful terms (see below) and/or certifications, be very wary of products labeled this way.

GREEN-COLORED TEXT/PRODUCTS

Sometimes when we say "greenwashing," we mean it literally. Some manufacturers just add the color green to their packaging to mislead the consumer into thinking it's an environmentally friendly product. A perfect example of this is green plastic bags. Many certified-compostable bags are green, so other bag manufacturers have made their plastic (non-compostable) bags green to intentionally confuse the consumer. Check for certification (see below).

THESE TERMS ARE MEANINGFUL:

"HOW2RECYCLE" LABELS

These labels appear on the packaging of certain brands involved in a coalition intended to create clear communication to consumers with details about how to properly recycle a product. They base their labels on what's generally recyclable for at least 60 percent of the nation's population. This is a step in the right direction, but the labeling may not accurately reflect local guidelines. For this reason, always defer to your local guidelines for confirmation of what's accepted in your community's program.

BPI-CERTIFIED COMPOSTABLE

BPI (the Biodegradable Products Institute) is a third-party organization that certifies product compostability through scientific tests. If a product says "BPI Certified" and/or has the BPI label, it can go in your curbside compost bin or to a commercial compost drop-off location. These products won't necessarily do well in your backyard compost, which does not undergo quite the same process or conditions as industrial compost, but they will decompose in a commercial setting and are certified to be petroleum plastic–free (which means no microplastics).

ASTM D6400

This is a standard that products have to meet to be BPI Certified. It is therefore usually accompanied by the BPI label but can be taken to mean "compostable" when it appears alone as well.

#7 PLA

Resin code number 7 is the "catch-all" of plastic resins. If something has a 7 on the bottom, it could be a resin that doesn't show up enough to get its own number or could be a combination of the first six resins. Additionally, when certified-compostable "plastics" made from corn and plant starch came on the market, the plastics industry labeled them as 7. Generally, a 7 is trash, but if it's accompanied by the letters "PLA," you can be sure that it's plastic made from plant starch rather than petroleum, and that it's commercially compostable.

_% POST-CONSUMER RECYCLED CONTENT

This is a good one to look for when purchasing products. While it doesn't tell you anything about whether the product is recyclable, it tells you that the product was made with a certain percentage of recycled material. Buying products made from post-consumer recycled content saves virgin natural resources and supports recycling programs by closing the loop and providing demand. If it doesn't have the words "post-consumer," and simply says "made from x% recycled content," that is a different kind of product. "Post-consumer" means the product's previous life was a product that went into a recycling bin and was remanufactured into something new. "Recycled content" simply means it may be trim-waste from manufacturing a paper product, for example. Its previous life was a tree. Always look for the highest "post-consumer" recycled content you can find to truly support recycling.

QUESTIONS? WHEN IN DOUBT, GIVE US A SHOUT! 303.444.6634 or recycle@ecocycle.org