



# The Ecology Action Center News

Winter 2009

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9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Monday—Friday

## The Illusion of Compostable Plastics

by Michael Brown

PLA. Also known as Polylactic Acid. This is one of the “new” plastics that we increasingly find among the various food containers and other plastic items in our lives. However, if you don’t look closely, you might not notice it. It is usually labeled as a #7 plastic, which is the “other” category of plastics, used for lumping various plastic types that don’t fit into other categories. If you look closely, it should also say PLA next to the 7 recycling symbol, which may be your only indication that this is no ordinary plastic. The interesting thing about PLA is that it is made from cornstarch or even sugarcane, not petroleum products, thereby rendering it biodegradable or compostable according to its manufacturers.

You may be thinking to yourself, “Wow! Biodegradable plastic—this is the solution to our waste issues! After all, doesn’t this mean that we can just throw it away and it will decompose in the landfill? But wait, it *does* have the number 7 recycling symbol on it, so doesn’t this mean it should be recycled like other number 7 plastics? Or since it is biodegradable I should put it in my compost bin, right? Right?!? Help!!!!”

Well, the Ecology Action Center is on the job, but unfortunately there aren’t many easy answers on PLA. There is a lot of confusion surrounding PLA and some of the other compostable and biodegradable plastics now being used in everything from single use forks and utensils, to plates and cups, as well as packing for produce and other food items. While at the hardware store the other day I was even surprised to find that plastic paint tray liners are now being offered in biodegradable plastics!

What we do know is this:

- PLA plastics are *not* recyclable in spite of the fact that they do carry a number 7 recycling symbol. The natural plastic materials will not mix well with petroleum based plastics when recycled and in fact they are seen as a contaminant in recycling systems. So *do not* recycle PLA plastics.
- Biodegradable or compostable plastics *will not* degrade in a landfill. Modern landfills are designed, built and managed to limit degradation. In fact, nothing completely degrades in modern landfills due to the lack of water, light, oxygen, and other important elements that are necessary for the degradation process to be completed. So using a compostable plastic cup and throwing it in the trash is no different than using a Styrofoam cup and throwing it in the trash—it is going to sit in the landfill for thousands of years.
- Most compostable plastics are designed to break down in commercial composting facilities (not backyard composters), something residents do not currently have access to in central Illinois. A commercial composting facility typically operates at much higher temperatures than is possible in a home compost bin; these consistently higher temperatures are apparently necessary for complete breakdown of these bio-plastics.
- There is a significant difference between “compostable” and “biodegradable” plastics. The American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) requires that a plastic labeled compostable break down at the same rate as cellulose (paper), that it completely disintegrates, and that the biodegradation does not produce any toxic material. Biodegradable plastic by definition has no requirement for quick breakdown nor any prohibition against producing toxic material.

So where does this leave us? What should we do with our PLA and other compostable or biodegradable plastics? The “biodegradable” plastics leave something to be desired; they are not designed to break down within a reasonable amount of time, they may fragment instead of breaking down completely and may actually contaminate the compost with toxins; these should probably be thrown in the trash. Compostable plastics on the other hand, while they may be designed for commercial composting facilities, may still have some potential.

*Continued on page 3*



# Happy Green Holidays!

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Michael Brown  
Executive Director

DeAnna Belz  
Assistant Director

Michele Bell  
Environmental Educator

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## The Holiday Bag

By DeAnna Belz

As the holiday giving season approaches I want to share a story of a special gift lost in the tangle of used and crinkled wrapping paper, tissue paper, ribbons, boxes and bows. About ten years ago, as my family celebrated the season of giving, an envelope containing that special 'green' paper was accidentally swept up in the holiday debris. We frantically searched the room before determining it must have been stuffed in the large black trash bag destined for the curb. Fortunately, the valuable envelope was found, but not before the realization of how many trees must've been destroyed, how much energy expended and pollution created so that our holiday gifts could stay hidden under a tree for two or three weeks. Not to mention how much money we had spent only to have it thrown to the curb and sent to the landfill.

Thus, the holiday bag tradition was born. My daughters, ages seven and eleven, and I went about sewing a plethora of seasonally decorated, three sided bags. These pillow case inspired wrappings came in all shapes and sizes and replaced the rolls of expensive wrapping paper that had been our former technique for disguising our gifts. They appeared as pillows under the tree, each one unique in shape and holding our secrets until the arrival of that magical day.

On Christmas morning, we sat together untying these gifts – but our greatest gift that year was to our environment. We had absolutely no trash – no black bag full of remnants of trees destroyed for the sake of this holiday.

The tradition has continued since that year – the bags have spread to my extended family and friends and several have found their way across the ocean to far away lands as they are gifted on with each passing year.

As we look for new and exciting ways to reduce our environmental footprint, this year I offer the suggestion of the holiday gift bag—make it a holiday tradition! The memories of making these bags with my daughters are worth far more than any of the presents they concealed. May your holiday season hold green memories as well.

*Directions:* Purchase or re-purpose seasonal fabric; thrift stores are a great resource as well. Cut the fabric into squares or rectangles - use your judgment for size depending on the gift you intend to wrap. Stitch a hem down one side of the fabric. Fold in half with right sides together and stitch two seams to create a bag. Fold inside right and attach a long piece of ribbon approximately 3" from the hemmed opening. Insert gift, tighten ribbon, tie, and give!

## New at the EAC just in time for the holidays: Wrap Sacks!

For those of us not ready to get out the sewing machine to make our own, there are Wrap Sacks—a great reusable gift bag in colorful batik fabrics. Wrap Sacks come in an assortment of sizes and colors and each has its own serial number which can be used to track its journey as it is regifted again and again for many years. To get your own Wrap Sack, stop by the EAC anytime Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. *All profits help support EAC's environmental mission.*



# ....aaargh! Styrofoam Packaging!

## The Evil Styrofoam Monster Art Contest

By Michele Bell



Styrofoam cups, Styrofoam packing peanuts, molded Styrofoam packaging, Styrofoam plates, Styrofoam clamshells, Styrofoam is everywhere! You try your best to avoid it at restaurants, preferring to use your reusable mug for take-out coffee or asking for your leftovers to be wrapped in aluminum foil. But yet it finds you anyway, when you least expect it! You're excitedly opening that special package that came in the mail and aaargh! Styrofoam packaging!

Unfortunately, Styrofoam can not be recycled in Bloomington-Normal nor in very many places at all. The reason is largely economic—the cost of producing new Styrofoam is a fraction of the cost of shipping recycled Styrofoam back to a recycler.

But we do have alternatives—in addition to requesting more recyclable containers or using reusables, you can reclaim Styrofoam that would otherwise be thrown into the trash and make a Styrofoam Monster as a reminder to avoid Styrofoam at all costs. To do so, take reclaimed Styrofoam pieces and make a monster showing a scary expression. You may also use throw away items to create the face of your foam monster.

Label your completed Styrofoam Art Monster, with the monsters' name, your name, grade, and school. Submit your art to the Ecology Action Center at 202 West College Avenue in Normal next to the Normal Public Library. Deadline for submissions is January 12, 2010.

All Styrofoam Monsters will be exhibited at The Smart Home Energy Fair, on January 16 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Salvation Army Community Center at 611 W Washington Street in Bloomington. Bring your family and see all the art work; enjoy free lunch, children's activities and information on how to save energy and money at your home. All monster entries may be reclaimed the end of the event. Contact Mikki Bell with any questions by visiting [www.ecologyactioncenter.org/about/contact.shtml](http://www.ecologyactioncenter.org/about/contact.shtml) (309) 454-3169.



**"Horrible Hank"**  
**Artist: Reece I. Cull**  
**School: R.R.R.J.H.S.**  
**Grade: 8**

### *The Illusion of Compostable Plastics continued*

EAC is experimenting with these in conventional backyard composters and will keep you in the loop on our results. If you are interested in experimenting too, taking a few extra steps will help improve your results.

- Shred or cut your compostable plastics into smaller pieces; this generates more surface area and increases the rate of degradation
- Compost in a large pile; the greater mass will allow greater heat to be generated
- Watch your ratios of carbon and nitrogen materials (or browns and greens); an ideal ration is 25:1
- Mix your pile regularly; this can help increase the temperature
- Please keep us in the loop on your composting experiments—you can email any information by visiting [www.ecologyactioncenter.org/about/contact.shtml](http://www.ecologyactioncenter.org/about/contact.shtml).

Finally, are there any benefits to using these bio-plastics if they are still going into the landfill? The answer is yes and no. Yes, making our plastics from renewable resources as opposed to a fossil fuel has the potential to be much more sustainable in the long run. However, the landfill doesn't discriminate between a bio-plastic water bottle or a petroleum plastic water bottle—garbage is garbage. In the big picture, the answer is still to reduce our waste as much as we can. Using reusables over disposables wins out every time.



***Give the gift  
of time and  
give of  
yourself***

## **Giving Green: Alternatives to Stuff**

**By DeAnna Belz**

While a multitude of brightly wrapped presents under the tree can certainly make most any child smile, what will they remember years from now? Is another pricey doll going to continue to invoke a smile as her dress fades? Will those fancy electronic gadgets that become obsolete almost before the garbage man collects the remnants of the holiday festivities become cherished memories?

With everyone so short on time and money these days, how about an alternative present - the gift of time and of you. Spending an afternoon baking cookies with a child or a day at the zoo with the family will certainly be remembered long after that new cell phone or iPod has been recycled.

Create a coupon book filled with one-hour time slots of togetherness such as coloring, gardening, playing a favorite game, doing an art project, cooking, playing dress-up, shopping, visiting a museum or taking in a movie. Special things that *they* like to do. Alternately, give them a coupon book of free time for the recipient including offers to babysit, clean house, do laundry, mow the grass, wash the car or dog, cook dinner, do the dishes, or anything that takes one of their chores away and gives them some free time. If you must make purchases, think of consumable items such as special cooking oils or spices for someone who loves to cook, perfumes, lotions and soaps, stationary for someone who likes to write, or gift certificates for a special evening such as a romantic dinner, movie passes, theater tickets or sporting events.

And if you **MUST** have packages under the tree, create homemade cards explaining the gift (on recycled paper of course) and then wrap in recycled paper, reused paper or holiday gift bags (see articles on page 2). Better yet create a panorama in a shoe box of the event out of reclaimed materials and attach the coupon. Believe me, this will become more cherished than that Gameboy or Blackberry.

This holiday season, let's all think outside the box and look within ourselves. We all have needs, but what we need most is each other. Happy Holidays!

## **From the Desk of the Executive Director**

As I pause to reflect upon 2009 I am grateful. This past year has been full of challenges for both our local community and the national and global communities. The recession has been difficult for many. Yet our community continues to support the important work of the Ecology Action Center and other local environmental organizations. For this, I thank you.

As we endeavor to raise awareness of important local issues and educate our community on ways to achieve a safer and healthier local and global environment for ourselves and future generations we are fortunate to find a receptive and eager audience. Additionally, our many partners in the community continue to emphasize the importance of our joint efforts in providing for a cleaner environment.

However, many challenges still lie ahead. We continue to need your support in order to grow our organization to meet the needs of our community. Please consider an additional year-end donation to the Ecology Action Center. As always, contributions to the EAC as a 501(c)(3) organization may be tax deductible to the fullest extent allowable by law.

You can also benefit the EAC while doing your holiday shopping. If you are a customer of Schnuck's grocery store, you can pick up a free eScrip card at their customer service desk. Once you have activated it and connected it to the EAC, Schnucks donates 3% of every purchase to the EAC at no cost to you. Another option is the new EAC Capitol One credit card. You can sign up and receive all of the benefits of a Capital One Visa or Master Card while also helping the EAC—Capital One makes a \$25 donation when you make your first purchase with your new card and then contributes 1% of every purchase to the EAC. For more information on these programs, please contact me at (309) 454-3169 or by visiting [www.ecologyactioncenter.org/about/contact.shtml](http://www.ecologyactioncenter.org/about/contact.shtml) or look for the links on our website.

Finally, don't forget some of the great green gifts at the EAC including economical rain barrels, the new reusable WrapSacks for wrapping gifts, the 2010 Waste Reduction Calendar with great artwork by local students, our heavy duty recycled canvas shopping totes, or the very convenient ChicoBag. Profits from the sale of all of these items help support the mission of the Ecology Action Center.

Thank you again for your continuing support; together we can achieve a greener future for all.



*...let's get  
this job done.  
Less is more.*

## A Holiday Recycling Story

By Michele Bell

After the Goode family holiday get together with fun, sharing food and re-gift giving, the Goode family is relaxing in the family room. The children have enjoyed spending time with family members from great grandparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins to their extended family. Mom and dad received a double reclining chair from the whole family.

Mom and all the aunties have been talking about how to reduce items in each of their homes. "What should we do with the old love seat since we got the new double recliner?" mom questioned.

"The old bench is still good," dad piped in.

Mom replied, "I would love to give this to another family, who could enjoy the hugs and warmth that we felt sitting together when we just got married."

"Ahh," Dad said with remembrance, "That was the only furniture we had in that small apartment."

"No, it wasn't," said mom, "We had that big wooden box that I painted with bright yellow flowers and put the pillow on to make a large comfortable seat for our dinner table."

"And remember we had no TV only one lamp, and the broken record player," laughed dad. "Well, we did have this nice love seat," mom said while smiling at dad.

Michael, their oldest son, had volunteered and helped with the furniture pick up at the Recycling Furniture for Families, entered into the mix and shouted "Hey D & M why don't ya call Recycling Furniture for Families at 829-6500, and they'll come to pick up the bench from us and give the furniture to a family who could really use it or I will go online to their website [www.RecyclingFurnitureforFamilies.org](http://www.RecyclingFurnitureforFamilies.org) and e-mail them for a pick up."

The three sisters now thought of dishes and glasses, dinning tables and chairs, TV's and VCR's, bedding and linens, mattresses and bed springs, coffee table and lamps, easy chairs and recliners, and more. Michael said "All are of those items are able to be used at the Recycling Furniture for Families."

"Great, let's get this job done. Less is more." said mom as she smiled at her sisters.

## The 2nd Annual Mack Glass Christmas Tree

By LizBeth Ogiela-Scheck, Mack Glass

As the year begins to wind down and the Christmas season is set to begin, things will be heating up at the Bloomington Center for Performing Arts...literally. For 2009, Mack Glass has partnered up with the BCPA to build the glass tree made of recycled glass in their front lawn just off US51 downtown Bloomington. We will have our furnace, Frankie da Void, on site melting thousands of green and clear bottles and jars. The public is invited to view the process as we build a 16ft glass tree utilizing the recycled liquid glass.

Got Glass? We will be collecting glass at the BCPA during the event. The more glass the community brings the bigger the tree gets.

We will have an array of unique blown glass items for sale just inside the BCPA.

DATES: The first two weekends in December. Dec. 4-6 and 11-13, 9a-5p each day.

LOCATION: The Bloomington Performing Arts Center at 600 N. East St., Bloomington (Drive North on Main Street past downtown and look to your right)

Recycle the Ecology Action Center Newsletter by passing it on to someone else after you have read it.



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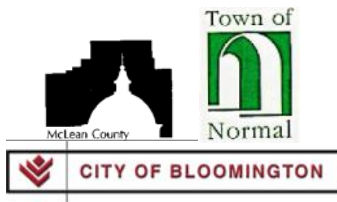
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## Calendar of Upcoming Events

Friday, December 25: EAC Closed

Friday, January 1: EAC Closed

Tuesday, January 5, 2010 5:30 p.m. : Green Drinks environmental networking and discussion group at Medici in Normal . Call (309) 454-3169 for more information.

Saturday, January 16, 2010: EAC's \$mart Home Energy Fair at the Salvation Army Community Center at 611 W Washington Street in Bloomington. Call (309) 454-3169 for more information.

Watch the events calendar at [www.ecologyactioncenter.org](http://www.ecologyactioncenter.org) for more events and information.

Don't forget the green gifts available at the EAC in your holiday shopping!

