

## Palm-fibre based containers will find their way into composters

Eco-entrepreneur's Vancouver-based firm has found success introducing material into North America

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Eco-entrepreneur Shannon Boase wants consumers to treat her product like dirt.

That won't be a bad thing, because the palm-fibre-based containers her company distributes are biodegradable.

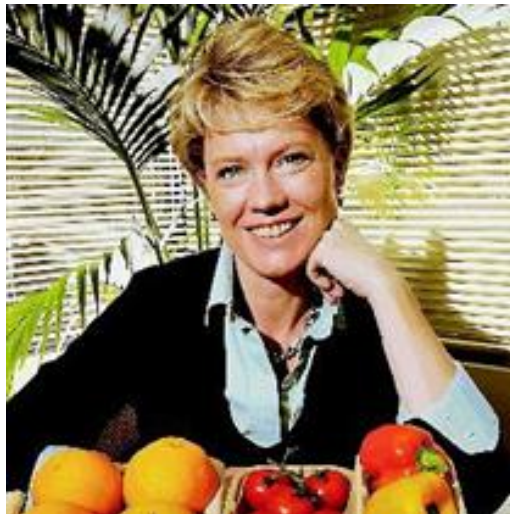
So instead of tossing paper plates or berry boxes into the trash -- or worrying about recycling produce containers -- consumers will simply tear them up and throw them into their backyard composters to be reused as soil.

So far, Boase's two-year-old Vancouver firm has found success introducing the Malaysian-made palm-fibre material to North America as containers for fresh produce.

"We made a decision to launch in the food and produce industry because it has a low design component and high volume," Boase said, "Which is what you need when you're commercializing a new product."

Her customers are large farms, greenhouse growers and produce consolidators such as Vancouver's Oppenheimer Group. The packages have found their way on to the shelves of retailers such as Wal-Mart, Whole Foods, Wild Oats, Loblaws and seasonally in Capers stores.

Boase, however, has her sights set much higher. The company is working on designs to turn palm-fibre pulp into plates, plant pots and protective packaging to cocoon fragile consumer products from home electronics to cosmetics.



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun  
 Shannon Boase says Vancouver has tested the palm-fibre product, which has showed itself to break down in a backyard composter within 90 to 120 days.

When companies look for ways to differentiate their products, Boase would love it if the environmental-friendliness of Earthcycle's packaging is considered as a means to set brands apart within the marketplace.

"Our goal is to elevate the awareness of Earthcycle to a stage that it's being considered [a packaging] option," Boase added. " So it's paper, plastic and natural fibre, or paper, plastic and Earthcycle."

Boase came across the palm-fibre packaging idea while working for an arm of the Malaysian government that sought ways of using the millions of tonnes of palm fruit husks generated every six months from the country's palm oil industry.

Boase noted that palm fruit crops turn around about twice a year, and once oil is milled from the fruit, the leftover husks are waste that was just burned.

However, Boase's Malaysian partner has found a way to steam clean and then chop the husks into a pulp that can be used for packaging.

In North America, Boase had the material tested for its biodegradability and certified as compostable under industrial conditions by the U.S.-based Biodegradable Products Institute.

However Earthcycle went a step further and had the lab that did its testing try the Earthcycle material under backyard composting conditions. Boase said there is no certification for backyard composting, but the lab did give them a testimonial saying that it works. She added that the City of Vancouver has also tested the palm-fibre product which has showed itself to break down in a backyard composter within 90 to 120 days.

Boase said that so far, Earthcycle's containers are proving to be competitive as an alternative to clear plastic clamshell containers used for produce, and she believes they are cleaner than other biodegradable products made from recycled newsprint.

Boase wouldn't talk about her firm's finances.

"It's very competitive," she said. "The plastic guys are all over us, watching us."

However, she added that "my investors are happy."

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