

The invention presented here concerns a biologically degradable polymer mixture, consisting essentially of starch and at least one hydrophobic polymer, a method of producing a biologically degradable polymer mixture consisting essentially of starch and at least one hydrophobic polymer, as well as a single-layer or multi-layer sheet.

For controlling the problem of waste, plastics are more and more being taken into account as time passes, not least of all because their proportion in the treatment of waste is constantly increasing as a result of their increasing use as materials and/or semi-finished materials or raw materials. In contrast to other materials, such as, for instance, glass or metal, the recycling of plastics, although frequently attempted, is very problematical since it is practically impossible to return the very different types of plastics separately, which in itself would be necessary in order to be able to make again reasonable use of the plastics.

For this reason, it must be assumed that larger and larger amounts of plastic must be disposed of, so that the importance of so-called degradable plastics or polymers is increasing. In this connection, biologically degradable polymers are of particular interest which are degraded under the action of micro-organisms, bacteria, fungi, enzymes or the like, and as low-molecular products scarcely constitute a problem any longer.

The probably most widely used biopolymers are in most cases based on starch, in which connection, to be sure, starch is scarcely suitable as an industrially usable polymer. Polymer mixtures with starch are known, the starch or else other biopolymers being preferably used due to their biological degradability, due to their favorable price and due to the independence from petroleum products.

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The use of biopolymers as industrial plastic is described in various patents. EP-O11 82 40, EP-28 24 51, EP-28 89 20, EP-BO 44 01, EP-32 65 14, GB-22 14 919 and EP-32 75 05 describe such as crystal starch, gelatine or other biopolymers are modified or destructured so that they can be used as industrial polymers. This is done by extruding or kneading the starch or the biopolymer with the aid of the water absorbed in the biopolymer or the starch, or by addition of further water, in which case, however, the relatively high water content present is extremely undesirable, for instance during the extrusion of a biopolymer which has been destructured in this manner.

In contrast to this, it is proposed in PCT/WO90/05161 that crystal starch be converted without water and with the use of additives or softeners or swelling agents, such as, for instance glycerol into an industrially usable polymer, i.e. into so-called thermoplastically processable starch. The processability and water resistance of this starch polymer is, it is true, substantially better than the starch polymers produced in accordance with the methods of manufacture described above, but the mechanical properties and, in particular, the water resistance are still insufficient for many industrial uses, such as, in particular, the manufacture of sheets.

For this reason, it has been proposed in a large number of patents that the starch be treated with further polymers in order to obtain properties which permit industrial use. Thus, CH-644 880, CH-644 881, DE-PS-24 62 802 and DE-24 55 732 propose subjecting the starch first to a surface treatment with some additives and then mixing it with thermoplastic polymers, such as polyethylene, etc. In DE-OS-40 38 732 a material is proposed which has a base of starch with the addition of water and plasticizing agents as well as an aqueous polymer dispersion, formed from a thermoplastic polymer.

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In contrast to the above-mentioned documents, patents such as EP-40 28 26, EP-40 47 23, EP-40 47 27, EP-40 27 28, EP-40 73 50, EP-40 97 88, EP-41 78 28, EP-O 32 802, US-39 52 347, US-50 95 054 and AT-365 619, instead of starting from crystal starch, start from destructured starch, gelatinised starch or plasticized starch, which are mixed with thermoplastic plastics such as polyolefins, polyalcohols, ABS-copolymers, ethylene/acrylic acid copolymers, copolymers of vinyl pyrrolidines, copolymers with amino groups, etc. In the case of all the above-mentioned polymer mixtures, based on starch, the problem arises that the compatibility between starch and the other polymers is insufficient or the phase mixing of the individual polymers is poor. As is known, starch is extremely hydrophilic, while, as a rule, the polymers used for the mixing are hydrophobic. In the final analysis, the biological degradability of all the said polymer mixtures is still insufficient since the degradation time of the polymers used, which generally are synthetic polymers, is much too long, so that one can scarcely speak of biological degradability.

In order to improve the mechanical properties, it is proposed in a number of patents, such as WO90/10671, WO91/02023 and WO91/02025, that the starch be first destructured with a high water content and the water content then be reduced to less than 6% during the production of the polymer mixture in the mixing process with an ethylene copolymer. In WO92/02363 it is furthermore proposed to add a high-boiling plasticizing agent to the polymer mixture, while in WO92/01743 of the same applicant a boron compound is admixed with the polymer mixture. In DE-39 39 721 it is furthermore proposed to add a cross-linking agent in addition to a polyvinyl-alcohol-starch mixture for the production of sheets.

In order to increase the biological degradability, WO88/06609, in turn, proposes admixing an iron compound as well as a fatty acid to a polymer

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mixture consisting of polyethylene and starch or modified starch. EP-282 368, in turn, proposes a biologically degradable mixture prepared from polyurethane, PVC with plasticizer, a carbohydrate such as starch, as well as an aliphatic polyester, polyurethane being suggested inter alia, to be based on polycaprolactone. In all the above-mentioned documents of the state of technology, it is clear that in all cases some properties can be improved by the solution selected while others suffer thereby. Thus, a compromise is always made between the properties, such as water resistance, biological degradability, and mechanical properties in order to be able to improve some of these properties.

Thus, for example, in the production of sheets from a polymer mixture, it is proposed, in accordance with a large number of the above-mentioned documents, that the non-starch part of polymer present in the proposed mixtures, produced by itself alone as sheet, i.e. developed with accordingly a substantially thinner wall thickness, has a substantially better tear strength than the thicker sheets produced in corresponding manner from the entire polymer mixture. The reason for this lies either in the high absorption of water or else in the poor phase mixing between the different polymers.

In accordance with patents EP-40 05 31 and EP-40 05 32, it is proposed that the starch be treated, similar to WO90/05161, by a high-boiling plasticizer such as glycerol, urea or sorbitol, in order to obtain thermoplastically processable starch, which is then mixed with ethylene-acrylic acid and/or polyvinyl-alcohol copolymers. Sheets prepared from these starch/polymer mixtures have, it is true, a better tear strength but are still too sensitive to moisture.

The same is true of starch/polymer mixtures prepared in accordance with WO90/14386, in which glycerol-starch-polyethylene and ethylene-acrylic-acid

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copolymers are admixed.

In W091/16375, in turn, there is proposed for the production of sheets, a polymer blend which uses thermoplastically processable starch in accordance with WO90/05161, together with a polyolefin, as well as a phase or bonding mediator in order to improve the phase mixing between the starch and the polyolefin. Similarly, in the as of yet unpublished PCT/CH92/00091, it is proposed that thermoplastically processable starch be mixed with at least one polyolefin and at least one ethylene-acrylate-maleic anhydride copolymer, the esterification product between the starch and the added copolymer serving as phase mediator between the starch phase and the polymer phase. The advantage of this polymer mixture is that, due to the good mixing of the starch phase with the further polymer phase, such as for instance the hydrophobic polyolefin phase, excellent mechanical properties can be obtained when, for instance, manufacturing sheets.

To be sure, all of these polymer mixtures also have the important disadvantage that their biological degradability can in no way satisfy the demands made today as to such degradability.

In connection with biologically degradable polymers, a direction which is targeted away from starch has therefore been pursued for some time, in the manner, for instance, that aliphatic polyesters such as caprolactone or polyhydroxy-butyric acid hydroxyvaleric acid copolymers (Biopol) have been developed which have excellent biodegradability. The problem with these products, however, resides in the fact that they are very expensive to produce, so that their use as industrial mass-produced plastic is out of question.

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In this connection, reference may be made to an article in the journal Capital 6/92, pg 208, entitled "Miracle Films Reduce Plastic Rubbish", in which such new developments are described. Another great advantage of these newly developed materials resides in the fact that they are hydrophobic and thus water resistant, this in contrast to starch which is very hydrophilic. This difference brings it about, however, that a "stretching" of the said expensive, biologically degradable polymers with starch involves the problem that two phases are present which cannot be mixed. This inability to mix starch with the said hydrophobic, biologically degradable polymers in turn, has the result that mixed polymers produced in this manner have poor mechanical properties, whereby, once again, the problem discussed originally above is present, namely that compromises must be made between water-solubility, biological degradability and mechanical properties.

The task of the present invention is now to propose a solution for the problem discussed above by providing a polymer mixture which has good water resistance, has perfect biodegradability, and, in addition, has good mechanical properties, thus making the use as mass-produced plastic possible. Another prerequisite for the suitability as mass-produced plastic resides, not least of all, also in the price of the polymer mixture proposed being within an acceptable range.

In accordance with the invention, the task proposed above is achieved by means of a biologically degradable polymer mixture in accordance with the text of Claim 1.

Proposed is a biologically degradable polymer mixture consisting essentially of starch and at least one hydrophobic polymer, the hydrophobic polymer being at least substantially biologically degradable and being capable of being

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suitably processed thermoplastically, the mixture furthermore including a polymer phase mediator and/or a macromolecular dispersing agent, the starch being present as disperse phase in the mixture with the hydrophobic polymer as continuous phase and the phase mediator or the dispersing agent being responsible for the molecular coupling of the two phases.

The polymer mixture proposed is thus based on the same principle as that set forth in the as of yet unpublished PCT/CH92/00091 in which, surprisingly, the phase mediators proposed in the said international patent application are also suitable for effecting the molecular coupling between the two phases.

Furthermore, similar to PCT/CH92/00091, one preferably proceeds from thermoplastically processable starch such as proposed, for instance, in W090/05161 or W091/16375. In analogous manner, it is therefore proposed in accordance with the invention that the starch be presented as so-called thermoplastically processable starch (TPS), obtained by mixing crystal starch, substantially free of water, with at least one plasticizing or swelling agent in an amount of 15 to 40 % in weight, relative to the weight of the mixture, the plasticizing or swelling agent used being suitable for at least partially swelling or dissolving the starch or derivative of it.

As suitable swelling or plasticizing agent for the production of the thermoplastically processable starch there are suitable, in particular, among other products, sorbitol, glycerol, hydroxy acids such as, for instance, lactic acid and their salts, as well as polyvinyl alcohol. In addition, however, there are also suitable all swelling or plasticizing agents or else additives such as used in the two above-mentioned international patent applications for the production of thermoplastically processable starch.

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The essential advantage of the polymer mixture produced in accordance with the invention over all known, state-of-the-technology polymer mixtures described, lies in the fact that this industrial "plastic" is based on starch, a thermoplastically processable which is substantially insensitive to water, since the hydrophobic polymer is present as continuous phase or matrix in the mixture and, on the other hand, the polymer mixture is of excellent biological degradability within a reasonable period of time, because the hydrophobic polymer itself is of good biological degradability.

In order for the hydrophilic starch phase and the hydrophobic polymer phase to have good mixing properties or for the starch to be suitably dispersible in the hydrophobic polymer, the phase mediator of the invention or a macromolecular dispersing agent is provided for, the phase mediator on the one hand possibly being a block copolymer which comprises at least two blocks, one of which blocks is at least substantially soluble in the hydrophobic polymer phase while the other block is at least substantially soluble in the starch phase

The phase mediator can, however, also be formed by a reactive additional polymer which is substantially soluble in the hydrophobic polymer phase and comprises groups which are reactive with respect to the starch and react with at least a part of the starch and thus, in the mixture, form the phase mediator which is responsible for the above-mentioned molecular coupling of the two phases.

In accordance with another variant of the invention, in order to form the phase mediator, one can start with a hydrophobic polymer of the above mentioned type which includes, in the molecule chain, ester groups which become reactive at raised temperatures after their disintegration and react, at least in part, with at least a part of the starch or of the thermoplastically processable starch. The

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molecule chains of the hydrophobic polymer which have thus reacted with the starch or the thermoplastically processable starch form, within the mixture, the phase mediator which, in turn, is responsible for the molecular coupling of the two phases.

In connection with the polymer mixture produced in accordance with invention, it is essential, however, that in all cases the thermoplastically processable starch be present as disperse phase, for which reason the starch can be present only up to a maximum proportion in the mixture, namely up to the proportion in which the hydrophobic polymer is still present as a substantially coherent continuous phase. As soon, for instance, as the two phases are present in the same function in the mixture, i.e. both as continuous phase and disperse phase, the water resistance of the polymer mixture is no longer assured. In practice, it has been found that the thermoplastically processable starch can be present in the polymer mixture up to a proportion of at most 70 % by weight, based on the total weight of the mixture, in which case the starch is as still present as a disperse phase. If the proportion of starch selected is too small, the problem again arises that the high price of the hydrophobic, biologically degradable polymer becomes too great a factor. Accordingly, the thermoplastically processable starch is present in the polymer mixture of the invention meaningfully in a portion within the range of 30 to 70 % by weight and preferably 50 to 65 % by weight, based on the total weight of the mixture.

As hydrophobic, biologically degradable thermoplastically processable polymers, the following polymers are, in particular, suited :

- cellulose derivatives with a degree of substitution ≤ 2 , such as cellulose ethers, cellulose esters or cellulose mixed esters;

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- aliphatic polyesters, such as caprolactone, polyhydroxybutyric acid, polyhydroxybutyric acid / hydroxyvaleric acid copolymers, and polylactic acids;
- hydrophobic proteins, such as Zein; and/or
- polyvinyl alcohol, prepared by less than 100 % hydrolyzation of polyvinyl acetate, preferably with a degree of hydrolyzation of approx. 88%.

As example of a cellulose ether, mention may be made of cellulose diethyl ether (CdE), which can be thermoplastically processed, for instance, with diethyl tartrate as plasticizer at about 190° C and is biologically degradable. The maximum water absorption at 20° C in water is only just 0.04 parts by weight.

As example of cellulose esters, mention may be made of cellulose diacetate (CdA) or as mixed ester, cellulose acetate butyrate, which can be thermoplastically processed with plasticizers at 180° C and which are biologically degradable. The maximum water absorption at 20° c in water is only just 0.05 parts by weight.

Both of the above examples of cellulose derivatives are offered today on the market at prices in the region of Swiss Francs 12.--/kg.

Caprolactone can be processed without plasticizer at 120° C; it is partially crystalline, with a melting point of between 60 and 80° C and vitreous solidification at -50° C. The mechanical properties are comparable to those of low-density polyethylene. The maximum water absorption at 20° C is < 0.01

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parts by weight; furthermore, caprolactone is biologically degradable. The prices are in the region of Francs 10.-- to 12.--/kg.

Polyhydroxy-butyric acid / hydroxyvaleric acid copolymers are thermoplastically processable, have good mechanical properties and a low water absorption of < 0.01 parts by weight and are furthermore readily biologically degradable. Their relatively high price of Francs 30.-- to 50.--/kg, on the other hand, limits the use of these polymers.

The same is true of polylactic acid which, although it can be readily thermoplastically processed, has good mechanical properties and is biologically degradable, is rarely used since its price is in the region of Francs 1000.-- to Francs 3000.--/kg.

As hydrophobic protein, zein is proposed, which is thermoplastically processable, with 0.2 parts by weight of lauric acid or diethyl tartrate at 130° C. Zein is furthermore biologically degradable and its cost is about Francs 20.-- to Francs 30.--/kg. One disadvantage of zein lies in its relatively high water absorption, which lies clearly above 0.1 parts by weight.

Finally, mention may also be made of polyvinyl alcohol, known under the trademark Moviol, the polyvinyl acetate used for the production being advantageously 88% hydrolyzed.

As already mentioned above, it is possible to use two different groups of phase mediators. On the one hand, phase mediators are proposed which are compatible with thermoplastically processable starch and, at the same time, compatible with the hydrophobic polymers. On the basis of the different cohesion energy densities of starch and the hydrophobic polymers, only block

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copolymers enter into consideration, namely those which consist of one block soluble in starch and of one block soluble in the hydrophobic polymer phase. It is, of course, essential in this connection that the phase mediator also be biologically degradable and can be suitably processed thermoplastically. As example of this, a polycaprolactone/polyvinyl alcohol copolymer may be mentioned. Such a phase mediator can be added in an amount of up to 100 % based on the weight of the hydrophobic polymer, but preferably only an amount of 5 to 50 % by weight of such polymer is used for the manufacture of the polymer mixture of the invention.

The other group of phase mediators comprises reaction products between a further biologically degradable polymer with starch which has groups reactive with respect to the starch and is compatible with the hydrophobic polymer phase, these reactive groups possibly comprising, for instance, epoxy groups or else acid anhydride groups. These reactive groups now react with a part of the starch and thus form in the polymer mixture the phase mediator which is responsible for the molecular coupling of the two phases.

Such a phase mediator can, in turn, be present in the polymer mixture in an amount of up to 100% by weight, based on the weight of the hydrophobic polymer, the polymer mixture preferably having a proportion of phase mediator of 5 to 50% by weight, based on the weight of the hydrophobic polymer.

The additional polymer used for the production of this type of phase mediator can be a hydrophobic polymer, taken from the above-indicated list of hydrophobic polymers which are used in the polymer mixture. In this connection, one of the said polymers is provided with reactive groups, such as, for instance, epoxy groups or acid-anhydride groups, which then react with the starch upon the production of the polymer mixture. In principle, it would, of

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course, be conceivable for the hydrophobic polymer to be replaced completely by such an additional polymer, whereby, in the final analysis, the polymer mixture would consist only of thermoplastically processable starch and the phase mediator.

The introduction of the reactive groups is effected in this connection in the manner that the reactive groups are grafted on a hydrophobic polymer, such as, for instance, a polymer in accordance with the above-indicated list, by means of vinyl polymerization or condensation, this being achieved in the case of the epoxy groups by a glycidyl ether and in the case of acid anhydride groups for instance by succinic anhydride. Of course, it is also possible to provide other reactive groups which can react with the starch molecules.

In contrast to this, it is, however, also possible to produce a polymer blend defined in accordance with the invention, during the production of which an externally added phase mediator can be dispensed with, in the manner that the phase mediator forms itself during the production of the polymer mixture. In this connection, it is proposed, in accordance with the invention, that as hydrophobic polymer be used a polymer having ester groups which are built into its molecule chains and which, at raised temperatures, after disintegration, become reactive and thus effect transesterification of the hydrophobic polymer and also, occurring in part as quasi additional polymer, react with a part of the starch or of the thermoplastically processable starch. The reaction products of the molecule chains which thus react with the starch then form the phase mediator which is again responsible for the molecular coupling of the two phases. Naturally, it would theoretically be possible for all molecule chains of the hydrophobic polymer to react with the starch, but it can as a rule be assumed that the transesterification reaction takes preference over the esterification reaction with the starch, whereby only a part of the

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hydrophobic polymer is converted into phase mediator. Again, the phase mediator eventually will be present in the polymer blend in an amount of about 5 to 50 % by weight, based on the total weight of the hydrophobic polymer.

As example of this, mention may be made of polycaprolactone, which contains in the molecule chains ester groups which, for instance, can presumably enter into the above-mentioned transesterification reaction with the starch at a temperature of about 190° C.

Generalizing, this results in particular from what has been stated above that in the polymer mixture of the invention, the phase mediator can be formed of starch or thermoplastically processable starch with aliphatic polyester grafted thereon, obtained for instance by reaction of polycaprolactone with the starch. In this connection, it has been found that the more starch including grafted polyester is present, the more the water resistance of the polymer mixture can be increased.

The polymer mixtures proposed in accordance with the invention can, of course, be provided with any desired additives, additions, fillers, pigments, etc., such as generally known in the case of polymers and, in particular, in the case of thermoplastically processable plastics. Since their addition is strongly dependent on the use intended, and since furthermore, such additions are well known from practice, their use in connection with the polymer mixtures defined in the invention will not be taken up in detail, with the exception of plasticizers. It is self-evident that, in view of the requirement of biological degradability of the polymer mixtures, this property must also be paid the necessary attention during the use of such additions and additives, since otherwise the biological degradability would naturally suffer thereby.

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As additive, mention may be made, in particular, of the admixing of a plasticizer which is compatible with the hydrophobic polymer and preferably reduces its melt viscosity. On the one hand, the advantage of a plasticizer is that the hydrophobic, biologically degradable polymer is made less brittle by the plasticizer and furthermore, that during the production of the polymer blend, the quasi encapsulation of the thermoplastically processable starch by the hydrophobic phase is favoured by the reduction of the viscosity.

A process which is particularly suitable for the production of the above-mentioned biologically degradable polymer mixtures of the invention is described in the text of Claim 16.

Preferred execution variants of the process of the invention are characterised in the dependent Claims 17 to 24.

For the production of the biologically degradable polymer mixture of the invention, one can start either from crystal starch or from thermoplastically processable starch, such as defined, for instance, in international patent application WO90/05161.

In the event that one starts from crystal starch, it must, of course, first of all be rendered soluble with the use of at least one plasticizing or swelling agent, in which connection the crystal starch should have for this rendering soluble a water content of $< 10\%$ and preferably $< 6\%$ by weight. To be sure, a certain water content of the said order of magnitude of up to 6% by weight can definitely be advantageous for the rendering soluble of the crystal starch, for instance with glycerol or sorbitol. Afterwards, the mixture prepared in this manner is melted to form a thermoplastically processable starch and mixed mechanically, in which connection the water content, however, must now be

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reduced to less than 1% by weight, and preferably $< 0.5\%$ by weight, based on the total weight of the mixture, and the mixing then continued until a homogeneous mass is obtained.

The thermoplastically processable starch is now mixed in the melt together with at least one biologically degradable hydrophobic polymer which is thermoplastically processable and with a phase mediator or a dispersing agent or another polymer soluble in the hydrophobic polymer phase, which contains groups that are reactive to starch, the water content, before or during the mixing of the said components being reduced to less than 1.0% by weight and preferably $< 0.5\%$ by weight, based on the total weight at the mixture in order to obtain in this way the biologically degradable polymer mixture defined in accordance with the invention, in which connection, in the case of the use of an additional polymer, the polymer mediator in the polymer mixture is formed by reaction of this additional polymer with a part of the thermoplastically processable starch.

It is important that the production of the polymer blend take place essentially with the exclusion of water, since, otherwise, the dispersing of the starch in the hydrophobic polymer under the action of the phase mediator would not take place properly. Thus, for instance, the acid anhydride groups in the presence of water, do not react with the starch to form the phase mediator but, rather, hydrolyze. This on the other hand prevents the formation of the phase mediator, whereby, as mentioned, a dependable dispersing is made impossible.

The presence of a substantially perfect dispersion in the polymer blend is, however, a prerequisite for the good mechanical properties of the mixture desired in accordance with the invention. Furthermore, there is the danger of the formation of bubbles during the processing of the polymer mixture A

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post-drying of the polymer blend after its production is not able to subsequently improve a polymer mixture which has been defectively produced as a result of moisture.

For the preparation of the polymer mixture of the invention, up to 70% by weight, based on the total weight of the mixture of thermoplastically processable starch can be used in order to make certain that, as required above, the hydrophobic polymer is still present substantially as the continuous phase. The remaining portions in the polymer mixture of the invention are taken up, on the one hand, by the hydrophobic polymer and, on the other hand, by the phase mediator which, based on the weight of the hydrophobic polymer phase, can constitute 2 to 100% by weight, and preferably 5 to 50% by weight. Accordingly, during the production of the polymer mixture, either 2 to 100% by weight, based on the weight of the hydrophobic polymer phase, of a phase mediator is added, or the same weight percent of another polymer which comprises the reactive groups in order to form the phase mediator in the polymer mixture by reaction with parts of the starch.

While for the production of the thermoplastically processable starch, the starch is mixed with the swelling or plasticizing agent in a temperature range in the region of 150 to 190° C, the mixing of the thermoplastically processable starch with the hydrophobic polymer and the phase mediator or the further polymer takes places in a temperature range of about 150 to 230° C. The mixing temperature to be selected depends in this connection essentially on the processing temperature of the hydrophobic polymer selected, for which reason, for instance, when using cellulose derivatives, a temperature on the order of magnitude of 190 to 220° C is used, while when using polycaprolactone, the production of the polymer mixture of the invention is preferably effected within a range of about 150° C to 190° C. With regard of the hydrophobic polymers to

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be used, reference is made to the list of suitable hydrophobic polymers given in connection with the characterizing of the polymer mixtures of the invention.

Similarly, as already stated when characterizing the different polymer mixtures of the invention, in principle, polymer mixtures with two different types of phase mediators can be produced. In accordance with a first variant, the thermoplastically processable starch is treated with preferably 5 to 50% by weight - based on the weight of the hydrophobic polymer - of a block copolymer as phase mediator, the phase mediator consisting of at least one block soluble in the starch phase and one block soluble in the hydrophobic polymer phase, such as, for instance, a polycaprolactone/polyvinyl - alcohol copolymer, in which connection, the at least one hydrophobic polymer, such as, for instance, polycaprolactone, is eventually admixed together with the phase mediator. Of course, phase mediators other than the one indicated above can also be used, such as, for instance, partially hydrolyzed polyvinyl acetate or a polyvinyl acetate/polyvinyl pyrrolidone block copolymer; it is essential in this connection that the phase mediator used contains at least two blocks, of which one each is soluble in one of the two phases.

In the other case, the reactive groups are either first grafted on the hydrophobic polymer suitable for the production of the polymer mixture of the invention by means of vinyl polymerization or condensation by reaction with a glycidyl ether of at least one aliphatic di- or polycarboxylic anhydride, such as, for instance, succinic anhydride, in which case the additional polymer thus formed together with the hydrophobic polymer and thermoplastically processable starch are mixed intensively in the melt with a water content of < 0.5 and preferably < 0.1 % or a hydrophobic polymer that has ester groups incorporated in its molecule chains is used; the ester groups becoming reactive after disintegration at raised temperature and thus leading to a transesterification of

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the hydrophobic polymer and also, acting intermediately as additional polymer, reacting in part with a part of the starch or of the thermoplastically processable starch in order to form the phase mediator. In corresponding manner, a hydrophobic polymer having ester groups incorporated in its molecule chains is also intensively mixed with the thermoplastically processable starch in the melt and with the above-mentioned low water content. This mixing is effected, for instance, in a plastic processing apparatus or machine such as a kneader or an extruder, the reactive groups of the said additional polymer or the disintegrating built-in ester groups reacting during this mixing process with a part of the starch or of the thermoplastically processable starch for the production of the phase mediator. It is essential, in this connection, that the use of an additional polymer that includes reactive groups is a polymer which is substantially soluble in the hydrophobic polymer phase or readily mixable with it. When using a polymer with built-in ester groups in its molecule chains, this happens automatically.

For the production of an additional polymer, one can start, for instance, from ethyl cellulose which is mixed with oleic acid or, in general, with an unsaturated fatty acid or a corresponding triglyceride. By means of radical reaction of the vinyl groups, the maleic acid anhydride groups are grafted onto the ethyl cellulose, which, as mentioned above, are capable of reacting with the starch and in this way form the phase mediator.

As example of a hydrophobic polymer with ester groups built into its molecule chains, mention may be made of polycaprolactone, the ester groups of which permit transesterification reactions with the starch from a certain temperature onwards.

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In accordance with another variation of the invention, it is possible to produce a polymer mixture according to the invention by mixing thermoplastically processable starch with a hydrophobic polymer which consists, at least almost exclusively, of macromolecules which have groups that are reactive with the starch. In this case, the hydrophobic polymer and the phase mediator in the polymer mixture of the invention are substantially identical. In this case as well the hydrophobic polymer or the phase mediator has, of course, to be present in such proportion in the polymer mixture that, as required in the invention, the starch is still present as disperse phase, with the hydrophobic polymer or the phase mediator as continuous phase, in which connection the molecular coupling of the two phases is given due to the bonds between the hydrophobic polymer and a part of the starch molecules.

To return to the above-mentioned example of the ethyl cellulose converted by oleic acid, ethyl cellulose is exclusively used, accordingly, for the production of the polymer blend, which has appended maleic anhydride groups. Depending on the selected processing temperature, mixture ratio and processing time, more or less phase mediator is formed, in which connection, as mentioned, it has to be ensured that the starch is still present as disperse phase. From the standpoint that the hydrophobic polymer and the additional polymer are substantially identical, there can naturally also be included the case, as mentioned, in which the hydrophobic polymer contains ester groups built into its molecule chains.

In accordance with the a further variant of the method of the invention, it has been found advantageous if the hydrophobic polymer is treated with a plasticizer before mixing it with the starch or the thermoplastically processable starch. In this connection, it is advantageous if the plasticizer selected is at least substantially compatible only with the hydrophobic polymer, i.e. is soluble

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only in the hydrophobic phase. Furthermore, it has proven advantageous if the selected polymer reduces the melt viscosity of the hydrophobic polymer. This leads to the assumption that the formation of a dispersion with the starch as disperse phase and with the hydrophobic polymer as continuous phase is further favored if the hydrophobic polymer is treated with a plasticizer which reduces its melt viscosity. As a rule, as is known, the phase with the lower viscosity in a dispersion forms the continuous phase.

Also in connection with the method defined in accordance with the invention, the description of filled, colored, reinforced polymers, etc. is dispensed with since the preparation of such polymer mixtures is well known in the plastics processing industry.

The biologically degradable polymer mixtures defined above in accordance with the invention are suitable for both injection molding and extrusion applications, reference being made here, in particular, to the production of single or multi-layer sheets. In this connection, at least one layer of such a sheet consists of a polymer mixture according one of the Claims 1 to 15. Therefore it is conceivable that a single-layer sheet is produced entirely from a polymer mixture of the invention or else, for instance, a three-layer sheet comprising a central middle layer, produced, for instance, exclusively from thermoplastically processable starch while the two outer layers which cover the layer of starch can be prepared from a polymer mixture such as defined in the invention. In this way, it is possible to produce a substantially water-resistant sheet which consists of a total of 80% by weight or even more of thermoplastically processable starch and which, as a whole, satisfies the demands made as to biological degradability.

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The invention will now be described in further detail below, in part with reference to the accompanying illustrations and on the basis of theoretical considerations and practical examples.

- Illustr. 1 in a diagramme shows the morphology of a polymer mixture in accordance with the invention;
- Illustr. 2 in a diagramme shows the mechanics of the phase mediation in a polymer mixture according to the invention;
- Illustr. 3 in a diagramme shows a representative stress-strain diagramme for the dermination of the mechanical properties for test bodies prepared by means of the polymer mixture of the invention;
- Illustr. 4 show molecular weight distributions of polycaprolactone, not
and 5 pre-treated and pretreated by means of esterification;
- Illustr. 6 shows the biological degradability of a polymer mixture in accordance with the invention in comparison with cellulose;
- Illustr. 7 the biological degradability of cellulose in comparison to various so-called biodegradable polymers.

First of all, referring to Figs. 1 and 2, the basic problem or object of the present invention which has led to the preparation of the polymer mixtures defined in the invention will be briefly discussed.

The incompatibility of the thermoplastically processable starch with hydrophobic polymers can be used, as shown diagrammatically in Illustr. 1, in

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order to disperse them in a matrix consisting of a hydrophobic material. With this structure, it is to be expected that the swelling of the thermoplastically processable starch during storage under water or the water vapor absorption can be effectively limited. The diagramme of the morphology of a polymer mixture in accordance with the invention shows, on the one hand, the thermoplastically processable starch 1 as disperse phase and the hydrophobic polymer 2 as continuous phase.

The boundary surface 3 present in this connection is shown greatly enlarged, diagrammatically, in Illustr. 2. The disperse distribution of the thermoplastically processable starch 1 in the hydrophobic polymer 2 is made possible under the action of the phase mediator 4, which phase mediator 4 comprises a segment 6 which is mixable with the thermoplastically processable starch 1 and a segment 5 which is mixable with the hydrophobic polymer 2. The phase having the lower viscosity in this connection, as a rule, forms the continuous phase, for which reason it may be indicated to add a viscosity-reducing additive, such as, for instance, a plasticizer, to the hydrophobic polymer. In this connection, it is advantageous for this plasticizer to be compatible only with the hydrophobic phase in order in this way to effect a reduction of the viscosity specifically in the hydrophobic phase.

The exact particle size of the individual phases, as shown in Illustr. 1, is determined by the rheological behavior of the individual phases, the nature of the mixing process, and the interfacial energy. Based on the thermodynamically caused incompatibility of the thermoplastically processable starch with the hydrophobic polymer, only a slight intermixing of the two polymers takes place at the phase boundary, which as a rule leads to an impairment in the mechanical properties of a mixture of the two substances. For this reason, it is necessary that a sufficient mechanical coupling of the two phases or a low

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interfacial energy be obtained, which can be achieved by the use of the block copolymer or phase mediator shown diagrammatically in Illustr. 2. This phase mediator penetrates through the phase boundary 3. As a rule, these phase mediators consist of two blocks each sufficiently compatible with one of the two polymers respectively.

The preparation of polymer mixtures defined in accordance with the invention will now be explained in further detail on the basis of the following examples, in which connection the above-indicated fundamental theoretical considerations are taken into consideration in order to obtain the good properties desired in accordance with the object of the invention for a thermoplastically processable, biologically degradable polymer mixture.

1. Polymer mixture of cellulose acetate butyrate and thermoplastically processable starch

As cellulose ester, cellulose acetate-butyrate (ZAB) was mixed together with thermoplastically processable starch (TPS) in a Brabender kneader at 160° C with different mixture ratios. As TPS there was used a starch which is reacted with 30% by weight glycerol, this being done in accordance with the processing conditions disclosed by way of example in W090/05161 or in W091/16375. Tenite Sutryate 525 of the company Eastman Kodak was used as cellulose acetate-butyrate-mixed ester.

The two polymers were first mixed without any additives in the range of parts by volume of ZAB to 80 parts by volume of ZAB, the balance being TPS, and on basis of pressed plates prepared therefrom, the swelling in water was investigated and tensile tests carried out on test specimens. In this



connection, it was found that as from about 55 percent by volume of ZAB the swelling was only slight and furthermore that the test specimens had experienced an increase in weight, leading to the conclusion that the TPS phase could no longer be extracted from the test specimens.

The values for elongation at rupture and rupture work are shown in Table 1.1 below. In this connection it can be noted that, as a function of the percentage by volume of the ZAB, the rupture work and the elongation at rupture pass through a minimum at about 50 to 60 by volume percent of ZAB the rupture work increasing approximately twenty times at 80 percent by volume. It can be concluded from this that in this range the transition from TPS to ZAB is present as continuous phase. Upon the simple mixing of TPS and ZAB, there is thus obtained merely a drastic impairment in the mechanical properties; this is undoubtedly due to the insufficient dispersion of the TPS phase in the ZAB matrix and to very poor mechanical coupling of the phases.

Table 1.1

Percent by Volume ZAB (% V/Vges)	Elongation at Rupture (%)	Rupture Work (KJ/mm ²)
30 %	10 %	10
40 %	10 %	37
50 %	8 %	35
60 %	4 %	28
70 %	6 %	66
80 %	37 %	800

Rupture work and elongation at rupture of TPS/ZAB blends as a function of the percent by volume of EAB; prepared at kneading temperature of 160° C; tensile tests carried out on 0.3 mm pressed plates.

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Since, in the case of incompatible polymer mixtures, the continuous phase is formed by the component having the lower viscosity, as in our case the hydrophobic polymer or the ZAB, a plasticizer which is only compatible with the ZAB phase and thus selectively reduces its viscosity was now added to the mixture. In this way, a better dispersion of the TPS phase was to be obtained. As plasticizer, acetyl triethyl citrate (ATE) was used because of its biological degradability. Mixtures were prepared with an amount of TPS of 40% by volume, with variation of the volumetric ratio of ATZ to ZAB, the mechanical properties obtained being set forth in Table 1.2 below:

Table 1.2

Percent by Volume ZAB (% V/Vges)	Elongation at Rupture (%)	Rupture Work (KJ/mm ²)
8.3 %	91.7 %	670
20 %	80 %	620
25 %	75 %	450
33 %	67 %	270
42 %	58 %	160

Rupture work and elongation at rupture of TPS / ZAB / ATZ blends as a function of the percent by volume of ATZ in the ATZ / ZAB phase. Mixtures prepared at a kneading temperature of 160° C; tensile tests carried on 0.3 mm pressed plates.

In the case of 8.3 ATZ in the ZAB phase a twenty-fold increase in the rupture work is already achieved as compared with a specimen without ATZ but otherwise the same amount of TPS (40 Vol.%), in which connection the material can be elongated up to 70%. On the basis of a scanning electron microscope

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photograph of the polymer mixtures containing a proportion of ATZ of 25* by volume in the ZAB phase, it could be shown that the desired morphology had been achieved and that ZAB forms the continuous phase. To be sure, it could be noted from the photograph of the polymer mixture that the size of the TPS microphases was still considerable and the dispersion obtained is insufficient. This is also shown in Table 1.2, where the mechanical properties with a percentage by volume of 75% ZAB are insufficient.

A further improvement in the mechanical properties was now obtained by incorporating a phase mediator in the polymer mixture as proposed in accordance with the invention. Upon the preparation of the polymer mixture of ZAB and TPS in accordance with the invention, epoxidized soybean oil was added, it serving at the same time as plasticizer for the ZAB phase. The mechanical properties measured for specimens with 40 % by weight TPS are set forth in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3

Vol. ant.ESO (% V/Vges)	Vol. ant. ZAB (%) V/Vges)	Elongation at Rupture (%)	Rupture Work (KJ/mm ²)
8.3 %	91.7 %	20 %	600
20 %	80 %	53 %	620
25 %	75 %	92 %	880
33 %	67 %	93 %	790
42 %	58 %	94 %	600

Rupture work and elongation at rupture of a blend of (1) 40% V/Vges TPS, (2) 60% V/Vges ZAB/EOS. the volumetric percentages in the table refer to the ZAB/EOS phase, rupture work and elongation were determined on 0.3 mm pressed plates, blend prepared at 160° C in a Brabender kneader.

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From this table it can be noted that by the addition of epoxidized soybean oil, the rupture work can be clearly increased as compared with ATZ. A scanning electron microscope photograph of the polymer blends thus prepared shows furthermore that the microphases of the TPS are substantially smaller and still have a size of only about 3 to 4 μm , in contrast to the TPS microphases in blends containing ATZ, where the size of these phases is in part 15 μm . As compared with the blends with ATZ as plasticizer, a reduction in the diameter of the dispersed TPS microphases by a factor of 3 to 4 can thus be obtained with the use of epoxidized soybean oil. This, in turn, means an increase in the total boundary surface between the two phases by the same factor of 3 to 4. Since even with an optimal selection of the melt viscosities of two incompatible blends, a mechanical dispersion on this length scale can scarcely be obtained, it has to be assumed that the epoxidized soybean oil, in addition to its function as plasticizer of ZAB, has also effected a reduction in the interfacial energy between the two phases. This can have been obtained only in the manner that the epoxy groups reacted in part with starch molecules and thus produced the phase mediator claimed in accordance with the invention.

The best mechanical properties were obtained with a blend consisting of 40% TPS, 15% epoxidized soybean oil, and 45% ZAB (percentage by volume), the determination of the degree of swelling based on pressed plates of a thickness of 0.3 mm after storage at 24° in water showed stable behavior, i.e. the plates do not fall apart. The swelling amounted to merely 9%, whereby the goal was obtained that TPS has been included in a matrix of a hydrophobic polymer.

the polymer blend produced in this manner can be produced practically 100% from renewable growing raw materials, whereby a material has been developed, the components of which are substantially biologically degradable.

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Upon the preparation of polymer mixtures from cellulose acetate-butyrate mixed ester and thermoplastically processable starch, it could therefore be shown that, with the selection of a suitable phase mediator, blends of good mechanical properties are obtained, the required morphology, i.e. an encapsulating of the TPS phase in the ZAB matrix, being achieved. Moulded parts made from this material remain stable upon storage in water and exhibit only very limited swelling. Particularly with epoxidized soy oil, it was possible to produce a blend having excellent properties. In this connection, a morphology was obtained which is characterized by a size of the TPS microphases of less than 2 to 3 μm . As mentioned above, it is therefore to be assumed that the epoxidized soybean oil not only influences the viscosity of the ZAB phase but also effects a certain reduction in the interfacial energy between the two phases. A chemical reaction (ether formation) of the epoxy groups with the starch is therefore to be assumed. A chemical modification of the starch at the phase boundary has thus been obtained, whereby a certain compatibility with the ZAB phase has been brought about.

2. Polymer blend prepared from thermoplastically processable starch and polycaprolactone

Polycaprolactone (PCL) has proven suitable for the preparation of polymer blends with thermoplastic starch (TPS) - Polycaprolactone is a homopolymer of E-Caprolactone and, according to the manufacturer (Union Carbide), is completely biologically degradable and non-toxic and suitable for the preparation of sheets and as polymer additive.

For the preparation of different polymer blends, three different types of TPS were used, designated below as glycerol-TPS, standing for a thermoplastically processable starch containing 20% by weight glycerol; as TPS-LSM 1 standing

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for a thermoplastically processable starch containing 15 % by weight glycerol and 15 % by weight sorbitol; as well as TPS-LSM2 standing for a thermoplastically processable starch containing 30% by weight sorbitol.

All three types of TPS were extruded, together with caprolactone, in a ratio of 1:1, the two types PCL 5 787 and PCL 767E of Union Carbide being used for the tests carried out.

In order to provide conditions which were as free as possible of water during the extrusion, the thermoplastically processable starch was atmospherically degassed before the addition of the polycaprolactone, whereby the water content was clearly reduced to less than 0.5% by weight. The extrusion was carried out on a Theysoim twin-screw extruder, specimens having different temperature profiles being produced for each mixture. On average, approximately the following temperature profile was selected in the extruder:

80 to 160° / 160 to 170° / 180 to 190° / 150 to 180° / 130 to 140° / 130° / 100 to 140°.

The throughput of the different polymer mixtures was varied between 20 kg/hour and 40 kg/hour. The speed of the extruder was selected within a range of 170 to 300 rpm. The energy introduced thus gave a value of about 270 to 440 W per kg of polymer mixture. The measured water content was 0.26 to 0.6% by weight H₂O.

Sheets were then formed by blow molding from the polymer mixtures prepared with the three types of TPS and the two types of PCL, in which connection, due to the low melting point of the PCL (about 60° C), the take-up

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rolls had to be cooled or, even better, the sheets were produced by pulling up. Tensile tests were carried out with the sheets produced in this manner in order to measure inter alia the tear strength and rupture energy. In this connection, the sheets were tested both after conditioning for 24 hours at room temperature and after 24 hours stored in water.

In order better to interpret the measured values of the tensile test set forth below in Table 2.1, reference is made, first of all to Illustr. 3, in which a stress-strain diagram is shown. The abbreviations used in said Illustr. are defined in the following list:

RS	Yielding point
As	Relative elongation at the yielding point
Rm	Maximum stress
Am	Relative elongation at maximum stress
Rr	Tear stress
Ar	Relative elongation at rupture

Furthermore, the abbreviations in Table 2.1 have the following meaning :

d	Thickness of the sheet
b	Width of the sheet for all sheets evaluated = 15.0 mm
SO	Cross section of the sheet (reference value for the tension)
W	Rupture work (proportional to surface area under the graph in. acc. with Illustr. 3)
N	Identification of the sheet sample measured

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Herein is :

- N = 1** Sheet produced from glycerol-TPS and PCL, the measured values shown in Table 2.1 each being an average value averaged over the values measured for different specimens, prepared, on the one hand, with the two PCL types 787 and 676 E and under the above-indicated different extrusion conditions.
- N = 2** Samples from glycerol TPS and PCL, after storage in water for 24 hours.
- N = 3** Samples of TPS, LSM 1 and PCL, conditioned for 24 hours at room temperature.
- N = 4** Specimens from TPS, LSM 1/PCL after storage in water for 24 hours.
- N = 5** TPS, LSM 2 and PCL, conditioned at room temperature for 24 hours, and
- N = 6** TPS, LSM 2 and PCL after storage in water for 24 hours.

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Table 2.1

N	Rs N/mm2	As %	Rm N/mm2	Am %	Rr N/mm2	Ar %	d μm	SO mm2	W J/m2	E-Mod. N/mm2
1	10.4	25.5	25.7	781	25.7	782	47	0.72	5.3	220
2	13.5	5.8	14.1	5	14	6	45	0.68	0.11	630
3	15.4	7.9	19.2	607	19.2	607	22.3	0.35	4.35	693
4	18.6	10.2	20.1	290	17.9	317	19.9	0.32	3.17	359
5	19	10.3	21.7	615	20.7	685	92.2	1.38	6.52	717
6	12.7	13	22.4	675	18	785	90.7	1.21	7.08	468

As can be noted from Table 2.1, the glycerol blend in dry state has a tear strength of about 25N/mm2 and a rupture energy of about 5J/m2. After 24 hours in a water bath, the tear strength, however, decreases to about 14N/mm2 and the rupture energy even clearly to below 1J/m2. This great decrease in the mechanical values may be due to the washing out of glycerol.

As compared with this, the sheet prepared from TPS LSM 1 and PCL in its dry state has a tear strength of about 19 N/mm2 and a rupture energy of about 4J/m2. Even in "soaked" state, the corresponding measured values differ only insignificantly from the values indicated; only the rupture energy drops to about 3J/m2.

The sorbitol sheet tears at about 2E/mm2 with a rupture energy of about 6,5 N/mm2. These values do not change even after 24 hours in a water bath, i.e. they tend rather to increase.

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By way of comparison, it may furthermore be mentioned that sheets prepared from pure polycaprolactone have a tear strength of about 18 to 20 N/mm² and a rupture energy on the order of magnitude of 7 to 9 J/m².

The polymer mixtures prepared with thermoplastic starch and polycaprolactone in a ratio of 1:1 on a twin-shaft extruder are suitable both for injection molding, flat-sheet extrusion, and the blowing of sheets. In particular, the polymer mixtures prepared with the sorbitol starch show excellent mechanical properties, so that, based on the above-indicated theoretical considerations concerning polymer mixtures containing two different phases, it must be assumed that a mechanical coupling of the two phases is established at the boundary surfaces.

It was therefore to be assumed that the ester groups in the polycaprolactone which are installed in the molecule chains enter into esterification reactions with the thermoplastic starch, whereby the molecule chains which thus react again form with the starch the phase mediator mentioned in accordance with the invention. This assumption was confirmed by the fact that transesterification reactions take place in the polycaprolactone starting from a given temperature, which it was possible to verify by molecular-weight distributions. This circumstance will be explained in further detail with reference to the molecular weight distributions shown in Figs. 4 and 5.

Illustr. 4 shows a differential molecular weight distribution of poly-epsilon-caprolactone P787 of the Union Carbide Corporation which was not subjected to prior treatment. The average molecular weight obtained is in this connection 213,500, the minimum measured molecular weight 212,400, and the maximum molecular weight ascertained was 218,600.

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The polycaprolactone used for the determination of the curve in Illustr. 4 was then heated to 190° C and then cooled. The molecular-weight distribution was again measured, it being now shown in Illustr. 5. Already on basis of the showing in Illustr. 5, it can clearly be noted that the molecular weight distribution is considerably broader, whereby it already is clear that an internal rearrangement of the molecule chains has taken place. Due to the ester groups present in the molecule chain, a transesterification reaction has taken place.

The values determined on the basis at the distribution of Illustr. 5 gave the following picture.

Weight average of the molecular weight	280,000
Maximum molecular weight:	538,400 and
Minimum molecular weight:	146,300.-

Since the internal transesterification reaction of the molecule chains in the polycaprolactone are in competition with corresponding esterification reactions within the starch, it is clear that, in this way, during the processing of the polycaprolactone with the thermoplastic starch, a part of the polycaprolactone reacts with the starch, as a result of which, as required in accordance with the invention, the phase mediator is formed which is responsible for the molecular coupling of the two phases. The presence of reaction products between polycaprolactone molecule chains with the TPS could finally be proven on basis of a heat-flow diagram, whereby the above-indicated assumption could be finally proven.

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3. Measurement of the biological degradability or compostability of a polymer mixture prepared by way of example in accordance with the invention

The polymer mixture in accordance with the invention which is used in Example 2, consisting of a 1:1 mixture of polycaprolactone and thermoplastically processable starch, the latter having been destructured with 30% sorbitol, was subjected to a composting test and the determination of the biological degradability. In comparison with this, the biological degradability of cellulose was also measured.

The corresponding degradability results are shown in Illustr. 6, the progressive degradation being measured as a function of the percentage conversion of carbon into CO₂. The diagram of Illustr. 6 therefore shows, on the one hand, the composting of the caprolactone/TPS mixture, which is represented by the curve 10. In comparison with this, the degradability of cellulose is represented by the curve 11. While the PCL/TPS mixture is completely degraded within only thirty days, the degradation of cellulose is not yet completed in thirty days. The measurement of the degradability was carried by the Organic Waste System Inc. of Ghent, Belgium, and the US standard AETM D5338 was used as method of measurement.

In order further to document the excellent degradability of the polymer mixture prepared in accordance with the invention, the biological degradability of cellulose as compared with various, so-called biologically degradable polymers available in the market is shown in Fig. 7. In it, the curve 11 again shows the degradation of cellulose while the curve 12 refers to a first sample, namely to a material of the Novomont Company known as "Chart BI". This material is a mixture of about 50% thermoplastically processable starch with an ethylene

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vinyl acetate copolymer having a hydrolysis content of about 75% and a partial content of polyethylene as copolymer. The thermoplastically processable starch contains, inter alia, urea, sorbitol, and glycerol as plasticizing agent.

Graphs 13 and 14 refer to Samples 2 and 3, comprising materials bearing the designation "Material BI" of the Novomont Company, these materials again containing 50% thermoplastically processable starch, about 40% polyvinyl acetate (hydrolyzed to the extent of about 85% to polyvinyl alcohol) and about 10% polyethylene as copolymers.

Finally, graph 15 refers to a fourth sample of the Novon Company, which is a foamed material consisting of about 80% starch and about 20% polyvinyl acetate, the latter being hydrolyzed to the extent of about 85 % to polyvinyl alcohol.

Samples 1 to 4 comprise, as a whole, materials which are available in the market as so-called biologically degradable polymers. As can be clearly noted from Fig. 7 however, the biological degradability is in part substantially poorer than that of cellulose, the degradability of which itself is, in its turn, as shown in Fig. 6, poorer than the biological degradability of a polymer mixture prepared in accordance with the invention.

The graphs of Fig. 7 were also obtained by the OWS Institute of Ghent, Belgium, in accordance with the AFTM Standard D5338.

The fact that the excellent biological degradability of the PCL/TPS polymer mixture prepared in accordance with the invention is not obtained at the expense of the mechanical properties is shown by the values in Table 3.1 below. In that table, the mechanical properties of a PCL/TPS mixture are set

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forth as compared with the properties of Samples 1 and 2 of Fig. 7. In this connection, the tensile stress upon rupture, the elongation upon rupture, and the energy density upon rupture of the three materials is shown for "dry" materials and as well as materials which have been stored for 40 hours in water.

In this connection Sample 6 is the TPS/FCL polymer mixture prepared in accordance with the invention, the biologically degradability of which is shown in graph 10 in Fig. 6

Table 3.1

Change in the mechanical strength of blown-extruded sheets, 'dry' and after storage in water

	Tensile stress at rupture (MPa)	Elongation at rupture (%)	Energy density due to rupture (MJ/m ³)
Sample 1	31	174	4.9
Sample 1 after 40 hr storage in water	27	255	6.2
Sample 2	16	176	2.3
Sample 2 after 40 hr storage in water	48	6	0.2
Sample 6	21	650	6.5
Sample 1 after 40 hr storage in water	19	850	8.0

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From Table 3.1, it is clearly evident that Sample 2 is hydrolyzed relatively strongly upon storage in water and that the material has relatively poor resistance to water. In contrast to this, Samples 1 and 6, i.e., in particular the polymer mixtures prepared in accordance with the invention, show excellent resistance to water. The mechanical properties themselves are also substantially the same, those of Sample 6, however, being even better than those of Sample 1.

Furthermore, a specimen of sample 4 was also included in the series of tests, but storage in water was not possible since the Novon material dissolved completely within only a few minutes. Measurement of the mechanical properties was, accordingly, not possible.

As conclusion of the measurements in accordance with Example 3, it is evident that the biological degradability of the polymer mixture prepared in accordance with the invention is excellent and substantially better than the corresponding degradability of so-called biologically degradable polymers offered today in the market. Furthermore, it was possible to show that this excellent compostability was not obtained at the expense of the mechanical properties or the resistance to water.

The examples described above cover, of course, only a small selection of the many possibilities for the preparation of a polymer blend in accordance with the invention. In principle, it is, of course, possible to mix any hydrophobic, thermoplastically processable and biologically substantially degradable polymer with thermoplastic starch, in which case, however, it is essential that in order to obtain sufficient mechanical properties of the polymer mixture produced in this manner, a phase mediator must be present in order to reduce the interfacial energy at the phase boundary. It is furthermore essential that the

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hydrophobic polymer in the mixture forms a matrix in which the starch is contained encapsulated.

Furthermore, it was found that it is essential for the invention that the production of the polymer blend take place substantially with the exclusion of water in order not to disturb or prevent the manner of functioning or the formation of the phase mediator.

A list of possible biologically degradable polymers available today in the market is in addition given below:

Zein (Zein F 4000) of Fenzian AG, CH-6002, Lucerne,

Ethyl cellulose (Ethyl Cellulose N SO) of Aqualon East BV, NL-2298 ER Rijswijk,

Poly-E-caprolactone of TONE Polymers (Union Carbide Corporation),

Poly-L-Lactid of PURAC biochem, NL-4200 AA, Gorinchem,

Cellulose diacetate (with unknown plasticizer)
(BIOCETA) of TUBIZE PLASTICS, B-1480 Tubize.

The above list sets forth only a few examples of biologically degradable polymers and is, of course, incomplete. All, for instance, synthetically produced hydrophobic polymers are, of course, suitable for the production of a polymer mixture in accordance with the invention, provided that they are biologically degradable: As example of this polyhydroxy-butyric acid may be mentioned.

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Finally, it should also be added that a large number of possible biologically degradable polymers are advantageously used with a plasticizer for the production of a polymer blend in accordance with the invention, since, on the one hand, these polymers are very brittle without plasticizer and, furthermore, the use of a plasticizer has proven advantageous, not least of all in order to reduce the melt viscosity. Thus it is, for instance, almost impossible to process zein without plasticizer since this material is very brittle. With the use of plasticizers it is of course advantageous that they themselves also be biologically degradable. It should furthermore be noted that, if the plasticizer is hydrophilic, the amount of additive should not exceed a certain value since, otherwise, the resistance to water of the entire polymer mixture will be decisively impaired.

The following substances; among others, constitute suitable plasticizers for the different biologically degradable hydrophobic polymers:

- for zein	palmitic acid
	glycerol monostearate
	sorbitol
	triacetin
	Carvon
	1,2-dodecanediol
	lauric acid
	ethyl levulinate
	dibutyl tartrate
	sebacic acid
	diethyl tartrate
	butyl lactate
	polyethylene glycol

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E- caprolactam
 levulic acid
 E - caprolactone
 glycerol
 triethylene glycol

- for ethyl cellulose epoxidized soybean oil

triacet in
 castor oil
 tributyl citrate
 acetyl tributyl citrate
 bis (2-ethylhexyl) phthalate
 bis (2-ethylhexyl) sebacate
 dibutyl adipate
 palmitic acid
 lauryl alcohol
 diethyl tartrate
 triglyceride

- for cellulose

acetate/butyrate acetyl - tri - ethyl citrate
 epoxidized soybean oil
 triglyceride
 oleic acid derivatives

The aliphatic polyesters are as a rule processed without plasticizer.

The above list of suitable plasticizers is intended to give a number of possible examples by which biologically degradable hydrophobic polymers can be

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plasticized. Of course, part of the plasticizers indicated for a polymer are suitable also for other biologically degradable hydrophobic polymers, in the same way, for instance, as a number of plasticizers suitable for ethyl cellulose are also suitable for the plasticizing of cellulose acetate-butyrate mixed ester. Although the present invention has been described in relation to particular embodiments thereof, many other variations and modifications and other uses will become apparent to those skilled in the art. It is preferred, therefore, that the present invention be limited not by the specific disclosure herein, but only by the appended claims.

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Claims

1. A biologically degradable polymer mixture consisting essentially of starch and at least one hydrophobic polymer, characterized by the fact that the hydrophobic polymer is at least essentially biologically degradable and thermoplastically processable and that the mixture contains a phase mediator or a macro molecular dispersing agent, starch being present in the mixture as the disperse phase with the hydrophobic polymer as the continuous phase and the phase mediator or dispersing agent being responsible for the molecular coupling the two phases.
2. A biologically degradable polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with Claim 1, characterized by the fact that the starch is present as so-called thermoplastically processable starch (TPS), obtained by substantially water-free mixing of crystal starch including at least one melting or swelling agent in the range of 15 to 40 % in weight, preferably 20 to 36 % in weight of the total mixture, with crystal starch or a derivative of it; the melting or swelling agent being suitable to at least partially swell or dissolve the starch or the derivative.
3. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with claim 2, characterized by the fact that the thermoplastically processable starch contains a swelling or melting agent at least one of the following substances : Sorbitol, glycerine, a hydroxy acid, such as lactic acid and/or its salt and/or poly vinyl alcohol.
4. Polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with one of the claims, as in accordance with the Claims 1 to 3, characterised by the fact that the phase

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mediator is a block copolymer, consisting of at least two blocks; one of the blocks being at least to the greatest extent soluble in the hydrophobic polymer phase and the other block being at least to the greatest extent soluble in the starch phase.

5. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 1 to 3, obtained by essentially water-free mixing of starch or thermoplastically processable starch with the one hydrophobic polymer of the kind stated, together with a further polymer which is reactive towards the starch; the polymer being at least to the greatest extent soluble in the hydrophobic polymer phase and which includes groups that are reactive towards the starch; these groups reacting at least partially with a part of the starch or the thermoplastically processable starch and in that way in the mixture form the phase mediator which is responsible for the coupling of the two phases.

6. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 1 to 3, obtained by essentially water-free mixing of starch or thermoplastically processable starch with a hydrophobic polymer of the kind stated, comprising ester groups built into the molecule chain, which become reactive under raised temperatures after disintegration and react at least in part with at least a part of the starch or the thermoplastically processable starch, which in this way, together with molecule chains of the hydrophobic polymer that have reacted with starch or with thermoplastically processable starch, form the phase mediator that is responsible for the molecular coupling of the two phases.

7. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 1 to 6, characterized by the fact

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that the phase mediator is formed by starch or thermoplastically processable starch with aliphatic polyester grafted thereon.

8. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 1 to 7, characterized by the fact that the proportion of starch or thermoplastically processable starch amounts to up to 70% in weight based on the total weight of the mixture.

9. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 1 to 8, characterized by the fact that the proportion of starch or thermoplastically processable starch amounts to 30 to 70 % in weight, preferably 50 to 65 % in weight, based on the total weight of the mixture.

10. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 1 to 9, characterized by the fact that the proportion of phase mediator amounts to from 2 to 100% by weight based on the weight of the hydrophobic polymer, preferably 5 to 50 % in weight. .

11. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 1 to 10, characterized by the fact that at least one of the following polymers is present as hydrophobic polymer in the mixture:

- a cellulose derivative having a degree of substitution ≤ 2 , such as a cellulose ether, a cellulose ester or a cellulose-acetate-butyrate-mixed ester;

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- an aliphatic polyester, such as polycaprolactone, polyhydroxybutyric acid, a polyhydroxy butyric acid, hydroxyvaleric acid copolymer and/or polylactic acid and;
- a hydrophobic protein, such as Zein and/or
- polyvinylalcohol, not 100% hydrolised.

12. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with the Claims 1 to 4 to 8 to 11, characterised by the fact that a polycaprolacton polyvinylalcohol-copolymer is provided for as phase mediator.

13. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with Claims 3 to 5 or 5 to 11, characterized by the fact that the mixture contains as the phase mediator a reaction product of starch or thermoplastically processable starch and another polymer with epoxide-, ester- or acid-anhydride groups which are reactive with the starch.

14. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with Claim 13, characterized by the fact that the additional polymer for the formation of the reaction product with groups reactive with starch consists essentially of a polymer in accordance with Claim 11, onto which the reactive epoxide-, ester-, or acid-anhydride groups are grafted by vinyl polymerisation or condensation.

15. A polymer mixture, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 1 to 14, characterized by the fact that the hydrophobic phase and the hydrophobic polymer respectively include a softener which is preferably compatible only with the hydrophobic phase and selectively reduces its melting viscosity.

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16. A process for the production of a biologically degradable polymer mixture consisting essentially of a mixture of starch and at least one hydrophobic polymer, characterized by the fact that starch together with at least one biologically degradable hydrophobic polymer and a phase mediator or dispersing agent or one of the other polymers which are soluble in the hydrophobic polymer phase is mixed in the melt with groups that are reactive with starch; the water content being reduced to $< 1.0\%$ by weight based on the total weight of the mixture before or during the mixing and the additional polymer forming the phase mediator through reaction with the starch.

17. A process, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with Claim 16, characterized by the fact that crystal starch or derivatives thereof are rendered soluble with at least one plasticizing or swelling agent and are mixed into the melt for the formation of thermoplastically processable starch; the water content being reduced to $< 1\%$ by weight before or upon the mixing and thereupon up to 70 % by weight of this resulting thermoplastically processable starch being mixed with the hydrophobic polymer and 2 to 100 % by weight, preferably 5 to 50 % by weight, based on the weight of the hydrophobic polymer, of a phase mediator or an additional polymer.

18. A process, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 16 or 17, characterized by the fact that the mixing of starch or of thermoplastically processable starch with the hydrophobic polymer and the phase mediator or the additional polymer takes place within a temperature range of 150°C to 230°C ; at least one of the following materials being used as hydrophobic polymer :

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- a cellulose derivative having a degree of substitution ≤ 2 , such as a cellulose ether, a cellulose ester or a cellulose-acetate-butyrate-mixed ester;
- an aliphatic polyester, such as polycaprolactone, polyhydroxybutyric acid, a polyhydroxy butyric acid, hydroxyvaleric acid copolymer and/or polylactic acid and;
- a hydrophobic protein, such as Zein and/or
- polyvinylalcohol, not 100% hydrolised.

19. A process, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 16 to 18, characterized by the fact that the starch or the thermoplastically processable starch are mixed with 5 to 50 % by weight based on the weight of the hydrophobic polymer of a block copolymer as phase mediator, consisting at least of one block which is soluble in the starch phase and one block which is soluble in the hydrophobic polymer phase, such as, for example, polycaprolacton/polyvinylalcohol-copolymer and said at least one hydrophobic polymer.

20. A process, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 16 to 18, characterized by the fact that the reactive groups are grafted on the hydrophobic polymer by means of vinyl polymerization or condensation by reaction with a glycidyl ether or at least one aliphatic di- or polycarboxylic anhydride, such as , for example, succinic acid anhydride, in order to produce the additional polymer, and thereafter the additional polymer thus produced and the hydrophobic polymer are intensively mixed in the melt with the starch or the thermoplastically processable starch at a water content of < 0.5 % by weight, preferably < 0.1 % by weight, for example in a plastic-processing device or machine such as a kneader or an extruder.

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21. A process, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 16 to 18, characterised by the fact that a polymer, into the molecule chains of which ester groups have been built, is used as hydrophobic polymer; the ester groups becoming reactive at raised temperatures after disintegration and effecting transesterification of the hydrophobic polymer as well as posing intermediary-wise as additional polymer; the ester groups in part reacting with a part of the starch or thermoplastically processable starch in order to form the phase mediator; the hydrophobic polymer containing the built-in ester groups, such as, for example, polycaprolacton, being intensively mixed with the starch at a water content of < 0.5 % by weight, preferably < 0.1 % by weight, in the melt, for example by a plastic-processing device or machine, such as a kneader or an extruder.

22. A process, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 16 to 21, characterised by the fact that crystal starch or derivatives thereof with a water content of a maximum of 6 % by weight, preferably 1 to 4 % by weight, are rendered soluble with 25 to 35 % by weight, based on the weight of the mixture, of a plasticizer or a swelling agent, such as Sorbitol or glycerine; and afterwards being brought to a temperature of approx. 170° C to 190° C while at the same time reducing the water content to < 0.5 % by weight, then being mixed for the production of thermoplastically processable starch; afterwards approx. 30 to 45 % by weight of the hydrophobic polymer and 5 to 15 % by weight of the phase mediator or 5 to 20 % by weight of the additional polymer, based on the total weight of the mixture inclusive of the starch, being admixed and then being mixed in the melt at a temperature range of approx. 150° C to 230° C at a moisture content of < 0.5 % by weight, preferably < 0.1 % by weight.

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23. A process, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with Claims 16 to 18 or 20 to 22, characterised by the fact that the hydrophobic polymer and the additional polymer are essentially identical.

24. A process, preferably in accordance with at least one of the claims, as in accordance with one of the Claims 16 to 23, characterised by the fact that the hydrophobic polymer, before the mixing with the starch or the thermoplastically processable starch, is treated with a softener, the softener being compatible preferably only with the hydrophobic phase or not being mixable with it and the softener reducing the melting viscosity of the hydrophobic polymer.

25. Single or multi-layer sheet, characterised by at least one layer consisting of a polymer mixture in accordance with one of the Claims 1 to 5.

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