

COMPOSTING AT SCHOOL



**Wisconsin
Partnership Program**
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Get your school composting! This brief provides an overview of how composting can be integrated into schools. It includes composting logistics, student involvement ideas, compost activities for the classroom and garden, and links to relevant resources. Composting is a hands-on way to teach students about the science of decomposition, landfill alternatives, microorganisms, and much more. It requires only a small space and brings a school garden full circle, from seed to soil. Composting can help your school reduce its environmental impact and teach service learning to students through making a positive change for the environment, their peers, and their school. Additionally, finished compost can offer a potential fundraiser and saves the school money on compost for the school garden and trash removal services.

What is Composting?

Composting is the process of collecting organic materials and allowing decomposition to turn them into a nutrient-rich soil called compost. Anything that was once living will decompose. By composting you are speeding up the decomposition process and returning the nutrients to the soil to be reused by living organisms. Finished compost is a crumbly, dark brown material that can be incorporated into existing soil help plants flourish.



Key Players in Creating an Effective Compost System

Much like a school garden, compost systems are most successful and long lasting when there are many different people invested in creating and maintaining them.

Students:

- Involve students in compost bin design and maintenance planning.

Teachers:

- Incorporate an intro-to-compost session during a staff development time or meeting.
- Incorporate compost experiences into existing curriculum or add new lessons about compost to the curriculum.

Community:

- Seek volunteers to maintain the compost during the summer.
- Consider allowing community members who do not have their own compost systems to add to the pile.

Kitchen staff:

- If your school will compost cafeteria scraps, kitchen staff will need to be on board.
- Discuss systems for collecting compost materials that will integrate easily with current kitchen procedures.

Facilities staff:

- Any addition to the school grounds will go more smoothly with the support of the school facilities staff!
- Make sure to address concerns such as pests, smell, and summer maintenance.

Types of Compost Systems

In-School Compost

Composting on school grounds helps students see the entire process of composting, from sorting to soil. Finished compost can feed the school garden, or can be bagged and sold as a fundraiser. A well-cared-for compost pile can produce all the nutrients a garden will need each year, turning an educational tool into a money-saving venture. Worm composting bins can even bring composting into the classroom.

Off-Site Compost

Some schools may wish to collect large amounts of cafeteria scraps, but may be unable to create large compost systems on site. Consider partnering with a local farm or compost facility that will compost materials off-site. Some small farms may pick up your compost materials.



Student Involvement

Design and Maintenance

- Create a student task force for implementing composting at school.
- Start a composting club, or involve an existing garden club to help maintain compost.
- Have students design and carry out a fundraiser with their finished compost.

Lessons and Projects

The number of lessons that can use compost as the teaching medium are almost endless. Consider:

- Science experiments and research projects.
- Social science surveys about composting in the city or surrounding neighborhoods.
- Math projects calculating the amount of space and weight saved in a landfill because of the school compost system.
- A lesson on microorganisms and/or insects that aid in decomposition.
- Marketing projects for finished compost or excess worms.

The resources section below has several activity guides with compost lessons for students of all grade levels.

Addressing Concerns

Will it Smell? What about rodents? Well-maintained compost systems will not smell or attract unwanted pests. If you are concerned about turning or containing a pile, consider purchasing a turn-able bin for easy maintenance.

Who will maintain it in summer? Summer garden camps or volunteers can help with compost, although, compost piles that are well-maintained in spring and fall can do well even with little to no maintenance during summer vacation. As long as decomposition is off to a good start, they may enjoy the “time off”!

Who will make sure cafeteria scraps are sorted correctly? Older students can be trained to monitor compost sorting, or recruit parent volunteers to help with this task. Cafeteria behavioral staff may also have the capacity to help monitor compost and trash bins as part of their normal duties. If there are no means to monitor sorting, some schools do “pre-consumer” compost using just scraps from the kitchen.

Resources

Compost Activity Guides

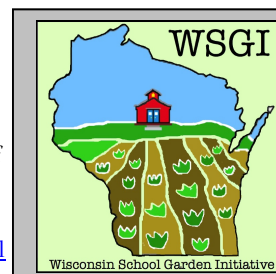
- Do the Rot Thing: A Teacher’s Guide to Compost Activities (K-12). Produced by: Central Vermont Solid Waste Management District: http://www.cvswwd.org/uploads/6/1/2/6/6126179/do_the_rot_thing_cvswwd1.pdf
- Vermicomposting and Decomposition Classroom Activities (1-8). Produced by: CalRecycle: <http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/Education/curriculum/worms/98activities.pdf>
- Composting Teacher Fact Sheet and Classroom Activities (1-8). Produced by: Teacher Vision: https://www.teachervision.com/tv/printables/EPA_Composting-Unit.pdf
- Composting in the Classroom: Scientific Inquiry for High School Students (9-12). Produced by: Cornell University: <http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/compostingintheclassroom.pdf>
- Composting with Worms for Pre-Schoolers. (pre-K). Produced by: Indiana Department of Environmental management: <http://www.in.gov/idem/iee/2369.htm>

Establishing a Compost Program

- Composting in School. Produced by: Joe Van Rossum - Recycling Specialist <http://www4.uwm.edu/shwec/publications/cabinet/composting/Composting%20in%20School-%20201014.pdf>

Compost How-to Guides

- Composting for Kids with Willie the Worm. From the State of Michigan: <http://www.mwaterstewardship.org/Portals/0/docs/Activities/WormComposting.Guide.pdf>
- Worm Woman: A website from the author of *Worms Eat Our Garbage*: <http://www.wormwoman.com/acatalog/index.html>



For more information about the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, visit us at WISchoolGardens.org

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