

Composting in School (K-12)- Getting Started

Behold this compost! Behold it well! - Walt Whitman

Schools in Wisconsin have recycling programs in place to recycle paper and containers. Today many schools are looking to recycle additional materials. This has led to an increased interest in composting food waste from cafeterias. This factsheet provides items to consider when thinking about starting a food waste composting project at your school and identifies additional resources to aid in program development.

Develop a Plan.

The first step in planning will be to bring together a planning or coordination team. This group will be tasked with gaining support for the program, defining roles and responsibilities, in addition to setting up and monitoring a program. It is important to include representatives from administration, food service staff and janitorial staff as part of the planning team. This group may also be tasked with determining a project budget and raising funds to get the project off the ground.

Nature of Food waste

Food waste can generally be divided into three categories based upon how it is generated: food preparation waste, food prepared but not served, and food served but not eaten. The volume of food waste generated by the school should be determined early in the planning process. This information will help as decisions are made regarding collection bins, composting equipment or a contract with local composter.

While composting is often the first thing that comes to mind consider if there are some steps that can be taken to reduce or reuse food waste. For example;

- Can unserved food be donated to a local food bank?
- Will more accurate meal counts reduce food waste?
- Can food preparation wastes be reduced?

Staff vs. Volunteers

School composting programs often begin as the result of an individual or group willing to volunteer their time to make it happen. However many composting programs have failed when these key volunteers leave. A sustainable program often requires dedicated individuals who perform key tasks as part of their normal job functions.

Another option is to utilize a service learning approach. In this instance one or more grades takes on the project and assists in the collection and composting of the food scraps. Composting can be incorporated into lesson plans for math, science and other curriculums.



A compost bin in use at a school in northern

On-Site vs. Off-Site

One of the most critical decisions that will be made is to decide where to compost the food scraps. If your community has a compost facility that is able to accept food scraps this may be your best option. This offsite option will allow your team to concentrate on issues related to collecting and transporting the food waste to the compost site.

On-site composting will require space for the composting, additional materials (paper, straw, sawdust, etc.) for mixing with food waste, as well as an individual(s) to manage the process. You will also need to decide how the compost that will be produced will be used. The planning team will need to come up with a composting system that will accommodate the volume of food waste generated and fit in the space available.

Health and Safety

Compost piles are built to provide optimal conditions for certain bacteria and fungi to thrive. A possible health concern with composting is the possible presence of human pathogens. With that in mind the following are some guidelines that can lessen the possibility of becoming ill due to working with a composting system

- Practice good personal hygiene when handling compost, hand washing is a must and wearing gloves is helpful as well. Keep compost moist to minimize dust.
- Avoid including materials such as raw meat and plate scrapings from people who are ill.

- Following good composting practices will reduce pathogen levels.
- Persons with weakened immune systems should use caution when handling compost materials.

Cornell University has a factsheet entitled "Health and Safety Guidance for Small Scale Composting" that provides additional information.



Finished compost ready for use

Additional Resources

School Composting – A Manual for Connecticut Schools – The Next Step in Recycling
http://www.ct.gov/deep/lib/deep/compost/compost_pdf/schmanual.pdf

Cornell Waste Management Institute - *Health and Safety Guidance for Small Scale Composting*
<http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/health.pdf>

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources - *Home Composting - The Basic Composter*
<http://dnr.wi.gov/files/PDF/pubs/wa/WA182.pdf>

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