

Mt. Horeb High: “Worms Work” for Special Education Class



A student helps turn the outdoor compost pile at Mt. Horeb. Students are involved in the composting process from start to finish.

Franke Wallitsch sells the best soil around. A recent graduate of Mt. Horeb High School, Wallitsch got his start as a composter—and a businessman—at his alma mater. Challenged by autism that causes him to be a non-verbal communicator, Wallitsch was able to gain experience and follow his interests in composting and waste systems as a student in Mary McDonough-Sutter’s special education classroom at Mt. Horeb High. Now, bags containing “Worm Works by Frank,” a finely sifted mixture of composted worm castings, can be found at K&A Greenhouses, the Premier Co-op in Mt. Horeb, and the Mt. Horeb farmer’s market.

Worm Works by Frank begins as cafeteria waste. Mt. Horeb High collects both pre-consumer waste – peelings and other kitchen scraps – as well as post-consumer lunch tray waste, turning it into food for the thousands of red worms that are an integral part of the special education program.

Students – many of whom have severe cognitive disabilities – sort, chop, and measure the waste for the worms, which teaches practical skills such as knife safety, and also creates a thriving compost pile. “Working with the compost provides an errorless learning environment for my students,” McDonough-Sutter said “It leaves room for mistakes and teaches new skills in a therapeutic way.”

Now in it’s fifth year, the Mt. Horeb composting program has overcome a number of challenges along the way. “When we started, we visited Growing Power, got some worms, and just jumped right in,” McDonough-Sutter said. “We ended up creating a giant worm bin out of an old hot tub to hold all the compost, but it just made this horrible stink that would waft into the classroom.”

Right before they were able to give up the project, they asked for help from Joe Van Rossum of UW Extension, who has extensive experience setting up and problem-solving compost systems. He helped McDonough-Sutter and her students learn more about the biology of the red worm and redesign their system.

July 2015

This story was produced by the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, a program of Community GroundWorks. For more information, visit www.wischoolgardens.org.



Mt. Horeb High: “Worms Work” for Special Education Class



Franke Wallitsch at his custom-made worm compost sifter. Franke purchases worm compost from his former classmates at Mt. Horeb, and processes it for sale in his own business, “Worm Works by Frank”

They replaced the four-foot deep hot tub bin with several wide, shallow bins more suited to the red worm’s lifestyle near the surface of the soil, creating an active, smell-free compost. In the winter, the worms move inside in plastic bins – literally lining the walls of McDonough-Sutter’s classroom – and food waste is pre-composted in traditional bins outdoors. In spring and summer, the worms move outside, where the pre-composted material makes for easy meals. Student volunteers monitor the temperature until school resumes in fall, when the compost is harvested.

“Composting provides an opportunity for kids to understand how much food waste they may be generating beyond just what’s on their lunch tray,” Van Rossum said. “They can see it build up over a week, or an entire year. And teachers can use the compost as a learning tool, whether it’s science or math or even writing.”

Students at Mt. Horeb are also learning small business skills via their school compost project. A portion of the worm castings are incorporated into a student-made potting mix for house plants; potted plants are then sold to staff at craft fairs and to school staff. The rest of the castings are sold to Franke’s Worm Works, where he prepares it for sale by sifting and freezing – to eliminate any potential pests or diseases – with support from a local vocational agency and his parents.

McDonough-Sutter and her students are hoping to expand the composting program to other schools in Mt. Horeb. The “compost classroom” already hosts third graders each year for a worm-themed field trip. In the future, McDonough-Sutter hopes that her students can help provide support for elementary cafeterias, teaching younger students how to sort food waste, and adding to the school’s compost success.