

Composting Grows in Rhode Island

by Wendy Fachon

When it comes to diverting compostable waste away from the state's landfill, residents and businesses can do their part by working in partnership with community gardens and local composting services to close the loop. Included among the solutions to the composting problem are backyard composting, residential food scrap drop-off and pick-up programs and large-scale businesses that collect and convert kitchen and yard waste into high quality compost to sell locally for farming and gardening needs.

BACKYARD COMPOSTING

This practice requires the combination of brown (carbon-rich) waste and green (nitrogen) waste, generally in a 5:1 proportion, to produce a rich, well-balanced soil. Brown waste includes dead leaves, twigs, shredded cardboard, straw and woodchips. Green waste includes vegetable and fruit peels, cores, scraps, spoiled vegetable and fruit, eggshells, weeds, grass clippings and yard trimmings. Online charts provide C:N ratios for each type of input. While woodchips have a C:N ratio of 500:1, food waste has an average ratio of 15:1. Water and airflow, added during the process of turning the contents, help speed the process along, and there are many different systems for doing this. The ideal ratio for a fully composted product is 30:1. With time and experience, backyard composters will come to know the proper blend through sight, touch and especially smell. A foul odor is absent from a proper mix.

Residents that lack the time, space or interest in backyard composting have other options. People living in Providence can drop off food waste at composting depots, including Whole Foods Market, Urban Greens Food Co-op, Earth Appliance Organics, in Smith Hill, and Fox Point Community Garden. Residents and businesses can also subscribe to food waste collection services.

GROUNDWORK RHODE ISLAND

Harvest Cycle, a year-round residential and small commercial compost pick-up service in Providence and Pawtucket is run by Ground-

work Rhode Island. Youth Green Team members ride bikes to pick up food scraps from subscribers and carry them to Groundwork's Ring Street Community Garden on Federal Hill, where the scraps are composted, or to Urban Greens Food Co-op. The number of subscribers has grown from 16 in 2018 to 140 today, and it composts 1,500 pounds per week. Since the program is designed for affordability, its services are provided on a sliding scale.

Having recently received a Department of Environmental Management brownfield clean-up grant, Groundwork is planning to develop an even larger composting operation on a vacant lot on Fuller Street, in Providence, with the intended goal of processing 7 to 11 tons of food scraps per week. Individuals and businesses can support Groundwork's efforts by donating funding for the project and subscribing to the pick-up service.

RHODESIDE REVIVAL

When three URI seniors decided to create a compost club in 2013 to reduce the amount of food waste produced in the school's dining halls, the curbside composting program known as Rhodesside Revival was created. Five years later, two of the three colleagues, Conor MacManus and Miguel Costa, re-established the idea on a bigger scale, and they now service residential, commercial and institutional customers in more than a dozen Rhode Island communities. A team picks up food scraps by truck and leaves a clean bucket on both a weekly and bi-weekly basis. These food scraps are revived into high-quality compost at Earth Care Farm, which makes its way to home gardens, schools, farms and parks.

HEALTHY SOILS, HEALTHY SEAS RHODE ISLAND

This multi-year composting project is funded by 11th Hour Racing that aims to inspire long-lasting environmentally responsible behavior by tackling ocean pollution at its root: on land. This project brings together composting efforts across the state in partnership with



COMPOSTING FACTS

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- According to the Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation (RIRRC), roughly 32 percent of the state's municipal solid waste is residential food waste.
- A head of lettuce takes 25 years to decompose in a landfill, where it decomposes without oxygen, creating methane, a gas 23 percent stronger than the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide.
- Integrated recycling and composting efforts could extend Rhode Island landfill's remaining lifetime from 2034 to 2049.
- Food waste is a valuable asset that can be used to improve both climate conditions and the quality of soil for farming, gardening and landscaping.
- Buying locally-produced compost eliminates climate effects from emissions and fuel consumption associated with long distance trucking of national brand-name products.

Learn more about these organizations:

FarmFreshRI.org/groundwork-ri-picks-up-food-scrap-in-providence
RhodesideRevival.com
CleanOceanAccess.org/hshsri
CompostPlant.com
HarvestCycle.org
eaorganics.com
EarthcareFarm.com

existing food-waste-diversion groups: Rhodeside Revival, The Compost Plant and Aquidneck Community Table (ACT). The three partners serve as the boots-on-the-ground team that manage all commercial and residential food scrap collection with an initial focus on Aquidneck Island. "We have seen substantial growth in program participants over the past year as more and more consumers begin to understand that they can make a difference by separating and repurposing their kitchen scraps," says Bevan Linsley, ACT's executive director.

THE COMPOST PLANT

Closing the loop in the food system to help grow more local food, the Compost Plant, in Providence, collects food waste from restaurants and other commercial entities and processes it into Rhody Gold™ Original Gold Farm Fresh Compost—an all-natural premium compost made without synthetic fertilizers. This compost is made from a diverse blend of local materials, including food scraps and coffee grounds, mixed animal manures, leaves, sawdust, woodchips and shavings, and by-product from the fishing industry and mushroom

farms. Landscapers, farmers and gardeners can order bulk deliveries or purchase bags of compost and soil products from select Ace Hardware and other local retailers.

EARTH CARE FARM

Rhode Island's oldest operating composter, Earth Care Farm, in Charlestown, was established by Michael Merner in 1977 and is now owned and managed by his daughter Jayne Merner Senecal. Merner is quick to say, "Soil is the foundation of our health and well-being." His daughter adds, "Many composts are produced only from grass, leaves, brush or even sewage sludge and may contain herbicides and heavy metals. We routinely test our compost to ensure safety and quality."

Creating compost is both a science and a craft. Earth Care Farm uses a carbon-rich bulking base of leaf and wood chips, received from local landscapers and towns. Then it incorporates nutrient-rich food scraps, seaweed, fish gurry, shellfish, coffee grinds, spent tea leaves and animal manures. All ingredients are mixed and turned in an aerobically managed compost process over a period of 18 months. One of the resulting products is its Home Compost Inoculant which increases the diversity of beneficial microorganisms. Bagged and bulk-screened compost, raised-bed mix and potting soil can be picked up at the farm during weekday business hours or purchased at one of 25 regional garden centers during the weekend. The farm can also arrange bulk delivery.

In addition to managing Earth Care Farm, Senecal runs another business, Golden Root Gardening, a creative garden design, installation and maintenance company. She also offers monthly, hands-on series of gardening classes, which begin with instruction in home composting, soil preparation and bed making. Senecal will be the opening speaker at Rhode Island's Composting Conference, taking place March 12, at Rhode Island College.

Wendy Fachon is a regular contributor to the magazine and host of the Story Walking Radio Hour on the Dream Visions 7 Radio Network. Look for her newest episode about soil and composting. Learn more at NetwalkRI.com.

COMPOST CONFERENCE AND TRADE SHOW

The 2020 Rhode Island Compost Conference and Trade Show will take place from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., March 12, in the Donovan Dining Center, at Rhode Island College. The conference is sponsored by the Environment Council of Rhode Island and the RIC Office of Sustainability, and features speakers from the developing composting industry in Rhode Island and from around the country. Registration includes lunch.

Cost: \$40/person, \$50/at the door. Register online at EnvironmentCouncilRI.org.