

Re-thinking Waste

“Each year, residents in Ohio generate enough food scraps to pile on a football field over a half mile high! Food scrap waste generated by all households in the United States could be piled on a football field more than 15 miles high.” Ohio EPA

It's time to re-think waste. According to the EPA, yard trimmings plus food scraps make up nearly a quarter of the total waste stream in the U.S. There are better uses for this material. In the book “Cradle to Cradle” by architect William McDonough, he promotes the idea that there is no such thing as waste...only resources. In this way of thinking, any organic waste is either food, fuel or fertilizer. Oat hulls or corn cobs? Fuel for a bio-mass co-generation plant. Manure or sewage? Capture the methane for fuel, or compost the stuff and use it as fertilizer. Yard waste and food scraps? Livestock food or composted fertilizer. Why would we throw away our resources?

As people are realizing the value of organic waste, composting is beginning to go main-stream. No longer just a mossy backyard garden hobby, businesses, colleges and cities are moving to manage their waste stream in a more thoughtful and sustainable way. This is just taking off in Ohio.

Youngstown State University lays claim to being the first Ohio college to compost kitchen scraps. The school audited their waste stream in 2005 and found that a full 35% of the college's waste consisted of food scraps. In 2006, they installed an “Earth Tub” in-vessel system (large container) which holds a semester's worth of food scraps from their main dining hall, and produces compost for the campus grounds at the end of each term. By composting they reduce the amount of trash which must be hauled to the landfill each year by more than 20 tons, and reduce the need to purchase chemical fertilizers.

Ohio University is in the process of installing what will be the largest in-vessel college food scrap composter in the state, and possibly the U.S., with a capacity for processing 3 tons of food scraps daily. Power for the system will be supplied by solar panels. Along with food scraps, they will be composting biodegradable service ware (made of sugar cane, potato starch, and corn plastic or PLA) from their dining hall and coffee shop, yard waste, sawdust from their shops, and bedding from their animal research labs. □

The Larry's Markets grocery store chain in the Seattle area has been composting since 1991. In 1998 they diverted 900 tons from the landfill. The LEED-certified Brunswick, Ohio Giant Eagle is a great local example of a business that's looking at its waste as an opportunity. The store grinds all vegetable and fruit wastes to make compost, while trimmings from the butcher shop are used for animal feed, and used cooking oil is reclaimed for biodiesel fuel!

According to the EPA, the Frost Valley YMCA in Claryville, New York, “composts 100 percent of its food discards from its kitchen and dining room and uses the compost in landscaping applications and for an on-site greenhouse and an organic garden.” And it gets better – they divert 80 tons of food scraps per year from the landfill, reducing waste disposal costs by \$10,000.

There are also commercial composters who will turn companies' and municipalities' organic waste into profit. Paygro, in South Charleston, Ohio, is a composting facility which accepts food scraps from large businesses, such as Dole, ConAgra, Whole Foods and possibly Ohio State University (in the planning stages), as well as manure from livestock, and makes a profit selling bagged compost. The Ohio Compost Association provides a list of composting businesses in Ohio.

Some cities are beginning to expand their recycling programs to include curbside organic collection. In San Francisco, every citizen is provided three bins – one for recyclable plastic, metal, glass and paper, one for organic waste such as food scraps and yard waste, and a third for garbage. You can be fined for throwing away materials that can be recycled or composted! Seattle is heading in this direction as well. But there are carrots as well as sticks - many cities who have municipal composting programs, such as Newark, OH, make a profit from the sale of the resulting compost. Others give the compost back to the citizens.

So what about Alliance? Thanks to Mona Henderson of Keep Alliance Beautiful, and others who have championed the cause, Alliance has a good start. We have curbside leaf collection, and occasional special days for yard waste collection, and she continues to look for grants to expand these programs. How can we take it a step further? Mount Union is working together with their food service, AVI, to explore the feasibility of composting their dining hall food scraps and yard waste. What can local schools do to process food waste on-site and create an educational opportunity as well as compost for their grounds (and perhaps their educational gardens)? What can local businesses do to reduce their trash removal fees and their carbon footprint simultaneously?

It starts with a change of perspective: it's not waste – it's a resource.

Check it out:

Ohio EPA Food Scrap Management website: http://www.epa.state.oh.us/ocapp/food_scrap/index.html

U.S. EPA “Don’t throw that food away!” tips and success stories:
<http://www.p2pays.org/ref/04/03040.pdf>

“Cradle to Cradle,” by William McDonough and Michael Braungart:
http://www.mcdonough.com/cradle_to_cradle.htm

Youngstown State University Composting website: <http://www.yzu.edu/recycle/compost.htm>

Ohio University Composting program: <http://www.facilities.ohiou.edu/conservation/Compost.htm>

Ohio Compost Association: http://www.ohiocompost.org/wst_page6.html

Green Mountain Technology in-vessel composting equipment for businesses, schools, institutions (can handle from 50 lbs. to 100 tons a day): <http://www.compostingtechnology.com/index.php>