

## **Considerations and planning when partnering with organizations on Large scale composting projects**

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Organizations from churches to non-profits, schools to social clubs all have the potential to host and benefit from large-scale composting projects. Nearly every gathering of people can count among them avid gardeners, environmentalists and folks interested in plants, food, ecology and recycling. So the people making up those organizations are ready and interested in composting. The act of creating compost is a great form of recycling and can bring together diverse groups focused on creating a valuable product.

However, before the first bin is built, turning schedule made or recycling bin emptied, several considerations should be made for the long-term success and sustainability of the operation. The following are such considerations stemming from a volunteer led, large-scale composting operation hosted by the Rio Grande Food Project, a food pantry on Albuquerque, New Mexico's west mesa. The pantry operates out of the Rio Grande Presbyterian Church. The composting operation arose out of an expansion of the existing community garden. The operation has been successful in redirecting the stream of compostable materials away from the landfill and into production of thermophilic compost. What once was hundreds of pounds of food waste and cardboard weekly has been reduced to one or two garbage bags full of clean recyclable packing materials delivered by volunteers to a city-run recycling pick-up point. The project has transformed an organization's waste stream of up to a hundred pounds weekly of landfill-bound garbage into valuable compost feedstock.

When embarking on a large, long-term project with many moving parts, it is helpful to begin with the end in mind. To that point: ask yourself what will the compost produced be used for? An on site garden or landscaping plants? Demonstration plantings? Will it be given away to volunteers? If not, where will it be stored until then? And while you're at it, how much do you hope to make? In general, how does the composting, both in operation and in the final product stage, fit in to the overall mission and meaning of the host organization? Working with invested staff, volunteer leaders, board members, congregation members, owners, and other invested stakeholders early on in the process will pay dividends later. Think long and hard about and list all the concerned stakeholders. You may focus on the board of directors to the point of overlooking the

daily paid staff. Are there weekend people different from weekday people? Night staff? Day staff? Now is the time to share designs, common visions and goals, and of course a good communication plan to help smooth things along during the new and exciting changes composting can potentially bring.

Early in the design and vision process, and once the major stakeholders have been identified and brought up to speed on the plans, a time should be set aside for a consultation from a local Extension Master Composter or Master Gardener with a good background in composting. Master Composters and Gardeners can be called upon to present to groups on a large variety of subjects for a variety of age ranges as well. This early input can be great in getting a fresh and hopefully experienced set of eyes on what you hope to accomplish.

Part of the planning process should be consideration of the different methods of composting that are available. Rather than forcing a large, hot pile process into a logistically closed-in organizations, perhaps worm bins or bokashi buckets could actually serve everyone involved better. How water-intensive is your planned process? Will the other visitors to the organization be accepting of the site of a large operation? Would slower, dump and run cold piles be better? A local Master Composter or Master Gardener can help answer these early planning and design questions.

Once some of the larger questions are answered, consider the holistic impact of this project. Time is a factor here as well, as seasonal conditions can impact your progress. A consideration of how activities will unfold in one season may be different in another season. Rain, wind, ambient temperatures all play a role in how compost evolves as well as volunteer availability. Will there be smells in the summer? How about flies? Will there be more waste at Thanksgiving? Where will the material be housed before being introduced into the composting process? Having stakeholders involved from the beginning is an obvious course to take, but what about three months, six months down the road? Think about how best to “check in” with the people critical to the project.

Midway through the first season of composting at the Rio Grande Food Project, garden volunteers learned about concerns of flies entering the church kitchen. As it was originally designed, much of the food waste was stored in a bin placed conveniently close to the back door. It was determined garden and compost volunteers could help by storing the nitrogen-rich food waste further away from the entrance, and by providing a smaller, covered bin closer to the door for smaller items. But it was only through checking in midway was the potentially festering problem solved to everyone's satisfaction.

The flow of greens and browns is potentially something a broader range of people can be involved in, so plan for educational presentations, articles and posters. Boxes, junk mail, paper towels and other browns are good but often overlooked sources of carbon. Food waste also should be considered at all levels, including break rooms and kitchens.

Keeping a log of materials processed will enable projects to provide data regarding waste, pounds of recycling, and pounds diverted from landfills.

Creating and committing to a good plan, some holistic thinking and some wise input from an experienced voice will help tremendously in the long-term success of any composting project. As part of a successful project, seeking to understand the concerns and feelings of major stakeholders, and also communicating back and educating for mutual understanding is certainly part of that success. But as composters and creators of “black gold”, the proof is, as they say, not in the pudding but in the compost. *The most powerful tool in demonstrating the value of compost is by using it.* Consider installing a demonstration garden if one doesn’t already exist. Put the newly created compost to work on site. Short of that, some small raised beds or planters can easily be fashioned or donated. These could be planted and amended to A/B demonstrate compost-amended soil vs. not. Many cash-strapped non-profits and churches would be thrilled to see their landscaping plants and trees benefit from an application of quality compost. Bags and boxes of finished, sifted compost can be sent home with the organization’s most avid gardeners to work with. This is especially important for those folks who may have some passing interest in compost or gardening, but have never had the opportunity to see first hand what quality compost can do to amend soil and improve overall plant health. Even small houseplants can benefit from a small topdressing of good compost. Once demonstrated first hand, people tend to become diehard fans of compost fairly quickly. Be respectful of your projects’ hosts and create the best possible product to share and prove it’s own value. The compost will be great for tomato plants, and the side benefit of building better communities and helping save the planet will come along for the ride, naturally.