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TOP STORY

WKU boosts composting by 1,000 percent

By CAROLINE EGGERS ceggers@bgdailynews.com Apr 5, 2019



In a single year, Western Kentucky University transformed its composting program from accepting 30,000 pounds of food waste to collecting 300,000 pounds.

“That’s a thousand percent increase,” said Elizabeth Gafford, WKU resources coordinator. “It’s been a really successful initiative. Reducing the amount of waste going to landfills by 300,000 pounds is incredible.”

In 2014, WKU initiated food composting by collecting scraps from the Fresh Food Co. In late 2017, a Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet grant allowed the university to expand food collection to all 15 dining locations on campus – and to purchase a Roto-Screen, a giant machine that essentially filters the organic material from items such as forks, plates and cups.

“This machine is what sent us to the next level,” WKU agriculture technician and compost master Joey Reynolds said.

Monday through Friday, WKU Facilities employees or students collect extra food from all campus dining locations in special, apple-green trash bins and drive to the WKU Farm off Nashville Road in a big truck, which includes a mechanical lowering device since the 35-gallon bins can weigh several hundred pounds. “The one from Chili’s weighs a lot,” Reynolds said.

The students roll the bins onto another mechanical device called a cart tipper, which lifts the bins into a container. Before the expansion, the container didn't need to be emptied even once a week. Now, it has to be changed at least every other day – as nearly 5,000 pounds of food can be dropped off in a single day. (The stench isn't stomach-curling. Unless the food has been sitting in the hot sun for multiple days, “the smell isn't near as bad as you'd think,” Reynolds said.)

Cable Wilson, a WKU junior studying finance, is one of the students who transports compost. He previously worked in the university's surplus development office, which organizes WKU's public auctions of old office equipment and furniture, before being transferred to composting.

“I enjoy it. It's more active,” he said. “You get to get out, drive the trucks and come out to the farm.”

Clay Mouser, a sophomore studying business, has been composting for about a year and considers the soil proceeds the main benefit – 75 percent of funds generated from mulch and compost sales at the farm fund student scholarships for students in the WKU Agriculture Department. But it's not his favorite job.

“It's OK, it's just work,” he said.

After transporting all of the food into the dumpster, the students wash out the bins and reload them onto the truck.

Reynolds, who helped compost leaves as a WKU student in the late 1990s, takes over from there. He transports the dumpster onto a blacktop – which he said has been outgrown at this point – in a pile of used sawdust from the WKU L.D. Brown Ag Expo Center and cow manure from the WKU dairy and beef herds.

Then he mixes and mixes. After about a month of mixing, he creates a new pile with the food, sawdust and manure and adds in leaf compost from the city of Bowling Green. From there, it's just a matter of making sure the temperatures remain between 130 and

160 degrees Fahrenheit to ensure that beneficial bacteria grows and nitrogen is able to break down carbon.

“We just speed Mother Nature up,” Reynolds said. “I like it, but it can be pretty boring.”

The final step involves running the new soil through the Roto-Screen to get the final product for market. “To sell it, it has to be clean,” Reynolds said.

To magnify the benefits of the program, Reynolds said the university will need to streamline the process of selling the nutrient-dense soil. (Hours and prices can be found at wku.edu/agriculture/mulch.)



The program would also benefit from a full-time student composter, as Reynolds’ previous student worker graduated last year.

“It’s a lot to do by myself,” Reynolds said.

The Environmental Protection Agency lists reducing food waste at the source as the most preferable method of diverting organic materials from the landfill. The second preferable method is feeding the hungry – WKU’s Food Recovery program actually does transport safe, edible food from several campus dining locations and delivers it to area nonprofits. But even with vigorous food waste reduction efforts, there will always be inedible food remains, and composting provides numerous benefits.

For one, compost remediates soils contaminated by hazardous waste. The healthier soil helps reduce air pollution, enhance water retention, provides carbon sequestration, promotes higher agricultural crop yields and can aid with reforestation, wetlands restoration and habitat revitalization efforts, according to the EPA.

In Bowling Green, Dr. Martin Stone recognizes this benefit. The Baker Arboretum receives several bins each week from campus, and runs the compost through a “digester.” Food goes in one end, the machine rotates the food, and compost comes out the other side.

“We’re literally converting compost into soil we use at the Baker Arboretum,” said Stone, Baker Arboretum director and WKU horticulture professor.

The other key benefit is diverting waste from the landfill. In 2015, the U.S. produced more than 39 million tons of food waste but diverted only about 5 percent from landfills, according to the EPA.

That’s why Reynolds wholeheartedly believes in the work.

“We try to be an example of what to do,” Reynolds said. “The more you can divert, the better off we’ll be in the long run.”

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