

Why should we compost, and how do we go about it?

by Krishna Winston

It's estimated that 30–40% of the food produced in the U.S. goes to waste (USDA), with only a little over 4% of that material being composted (EPA, 2018). Those figures suggest that food waste makes up a hefty component of our trash—adding weight, bulk, and moisture to materials destined to be incinerated or buried. Food decomposing in anaerobic conditions, which is what happens when trash goes into a landfill, generates methane, a more potent greenhouse gas than CO₂. Furthermore, when food waste, yard waste, and other organics are discarded, we lose nutrients that could be used to replenish and condition soil, whether in fields where commercial crops are raised, in home and community gardens, or in any vegetated areas. Depleted agricultural soil ends up being boosted with synthetic fertilizers, made from the same fossil fuels that play a major role in climate change.

The July 22 closing of the MIRA incinerator in Hartford has brought Connecticut residents face to face with a trash crisis that has been building for years. In response, DEEP, the Connecticut Compost Alliance, the UConn Master Composter program, municipalities, and other public and private organizations are encouraging us to think of food scraps as a precious natural resource, not trash, and to remove them from the waste stream. For those of you who can compost at home, this video from the Compost Alliance provides composting information and instructions in an engaging and easy-to-follow style: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUO1KsVz3po>.

For apartment-dwellers in Middletown, the City provides two year-round drop-off locations for food waste and one drop-off at the seasonal Friday farmers' market. The drop-offs are serviced by Blue Earth Compost, a local company headquartered in Hartford (<https://www.blueearthcompost.com/>). Blue Earth also picks up food waste from over 30 downtown Middletown restaurants and some public schools, bringing the material to Quantum Biopower in Southington, where it is processed into clean energy and compost. We encourage you to patronize the restaurants that have joined this "Feed the Earth" initiative (<https://www.middletownct.gov/1272/Feed-The-Earth-Middletown>) and thank your server, the manager, or the owner, or all three. At the farmers' market, Middletown residents who pledge to compost at home or bring food scraps to one of the drop-offs can receive free counter-top compost pails, as well as 4-gallon collection buckets if they plan to use a drop-off.

Blue Earth also provides curbside pick-up to a number of towns in Central Connecticut, with individual subscribers receiving three free 50-lb bags of compost per year. If your town doesn't support municipal composting, consider getting together with friends and neighbors to lobby your town council and public-works department. DEEP has grants available for pilot programs such as the co-collection initiative recently undertaken in Meriden and about to start in Middletown. Food scraps, as well as leaves and other organic materials, shouldn't be part of the waste problem; they can provide the feedstock for a more nutritious, livable future.