

Mulch Ado About Waste Handling: Community Composting Takes Off

Community composting is heating up. According to Brenda Platt, codirector of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, it is “flourishing” around the country — and *Bicycle* magazine dubs neighborhood compost piles a full-fledged “movement.” Composting, the natural process of recycling organic waste into nutrient-rich soil amendments, can occur on a variety of scales. Community composting projects fill a key niche — larger in scale than individual backyard composters but smaller in scale than the typical commercial-scale operation.

Localities around the United States are looking for ways to encourage a variety of composting approaches in an effort to reduce waste disposal costs and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions from discarded organic materials in landfills. According to EPA, about 50 percent of municipal waste in the country is compostable, such as yard trimmings, paper, and food scraps. Localities have made considerable progress in composting yard trimmings, but only about 5 percent of food waste is recycled.

While large-scale commercial composting facilities are necessary to reach the level of organics recycling that many localities hope to achieve, smaller-scale efforts have an important role to play. Natural Resources Defense Council’s Darby Hoover explains that community composting is an important part of the organics recycling infrastructure — along with backyard and commercial-scale operations — because it diversifies the system, making it more flexible and resilient to change.

ILSR has developed a hierarchy of preferred ways in which to “reduce food waste and grow community.” Similar to EPA’s Food Recovery hierarchy, it emphasizes that source reduction and edible food rescue are preferable

to composting. But, it also prioritizes various types of organics recycling efforts, including composting, from most to least preferred: home composters; small-scale, decentralized operations; medium-scale, locally based operations; and centralized facilities. The last serve a large geographic area, typically handle more than 100 tons per week, and produce compost that may leave the community in which it is generated.

The hierarchy highlights the “importance of locally based composting solutions as a first priority over large-scale regional solutions.” Platt contends that a key reason to prioritize neighborhood composting is that it “raises awareness” within communities. Specifically, such programs can empower and educate communities about the food system and resource stewardship, as well as lay the foundation for a future in which composting is commonplace.

In their study, the “State of Composting in the U.S.,” the co-

authors (who include staff from *Bicycle* and ILSR) explain that community composting helps ensure that organic waste is locally recycled and that any compost is used to enhance local soils, to support community food production and security, and to contribute to green infrastructure. Community composting also can provide training and employment opportunities.

State and local policies and regulations can encourage community composting in a variety of ways, including through grants, loans, and technical assistance. Platt suggests, however, that policies also can have the opposite effect. She points to municipal contracts that provide an exclusive right to conduct all organics hauling in a particular area to a specific hauler, thereby deterring micro-haulers who support community composting.

In addition, community compost-



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ing can be supported by local and state policies intended to promote organics recycling more generally. These can include requirements for use of locally produced compost in public landscaping and infrastructure projects, various forms of organics diversion mandates, disposal facility surcharges that fund composting, and “pay as you throw” measures that charge for disposal based on the amount of waste.

State regulation of community composting projects varies considerably, as some states exempt small-scale operations, which can include community composting projects, while others require them to meet standards related to odor, water pollution, pathogen generation, and quality of product. Furthermore, some states simply do not address composting, according to Platt.

Local regulations also are a factor in establishing composting-friendly conditions. For example, zoning ordinances that allow community gardens, urban farms, and others to compost as an accessory activity to growing food can foster community composting.

Regardless of the content of state and local regulations, Platt emphasizes the need to ensure that community composting projects do not risk “giving composting a bad name.” She encourages well-regulated systems and a “clear, supportive regulatory pathway” for community composting projects.

State and local governments should step up organics recycling and embrace community composting as an integral part of their waste-handling efforts.