

“Compost Happens” Workshop Results

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Adding compost created using landscape and kitchen organic waste to landscape beds incorporates valuable organic matter and associated nutrients into soil. This, coupled with the fact that landfill space is limited, led to collaboration between Pinellas County Utilities and our Extension Horticulture Department. The Recycling Department at Pinellas County Utilities Solid Waste Division purchases compost bins to provide free to participants of “Compost Happens” workshops. A survey sent in Sept. 2005 and Sept. 2006 to those attendees who received the free compost bins helped assess the usage of the compost bins. The survey is also used to quantify the amount of refuse composted and diverted from the landfill. The surveys show that citizens who embrace composting divert a significant amount of organic refuse from the landfill.

Pinellas County has primarily sandy soils with an inherent lack of nutrients and water holding capacity. Adding compost to the soil improves the water holding capacity and the structure of the amended soil, as well as supports healthy soil organisms (Stephens and Kostewicz, 2003). These beneficial organisms can help protect the roots of plants from harmful organisms in the soil (US Environmental Protection Agency, 1997). Compost also provides a slow-release source of nutrients for plants to use (Stephens and Kostewicz, 2003). “Compost Happens” workshops evolved from the needs to reduce the amount of organic matter going to the landfill and to promote water conservation strategies.

Materials and Methods

A 1½-h classroom presentation was developed and delivered at various locations around Pinellas County. A trained Extension Master Gardener is the presenter for these workshops. Participants are introduced to the process of composting and what items should be composted, along with the pitfalls associated with composting.

The Recycling Department at Pinellas County Utilities Solid Waste Division purchased compost bins to provide free of charge to participants of the “Compost Happens” workshops. The bins are manufactured by Presto Home and Garden (Appleton, WI); are adjustable up to 3 ft in diameter; and hold 14.2 bushels (17.6 ft³) at full capacity. Utilizing a compost bin for yard waste and vegetable kitchen waste reduces the amount of organic waste going to the landfill.

Results and Discussion

A survey was sent in Sept. 2005 and Sept. 2006 to a total of 479 participants in “Compost Happens” workshops who received a free bin. This survey serves to assess the usage of the compost bins and to quantify the amount of refuse being composted and

diverted from the landfill. A total of 346 surveys were returned. In 2005, 155 (80.6%) of the participants returning the survey indicated that they were actively using their compost bins and that an estimated 894 bags (about 4023 ft³) of yard and kitchen waste was diverted from the landfill to create compost. This compost is used in planting beds to enrich the soil by 79.2% of the respondents. In 2006, 191 (84.4%) of the participants returning the survey indicated that they were actively using their compost bins and that an estimated 2148 bags (about 9666 ft³) of yard and kitchen waste was diverted from the landfill. In this group, 82.4% of the respondents are utilizing this compost in their planting beds. To put this in perspective, an average-sized tractor trailer holds 120–130 cubic yards. The approximately 13,689 ft³ is equal to 507 cubic yards or about four tractor trailer loads of organic waste. According to Gator Freightways, Inc. (Wilmington, OH), a loaded tractor trailer will average 9 miles per gallon of diesel fuel. The Pinellas County solid waste facility is located in Clearwater and is approximately 15 to 20 miles from various parts of the county. At 9 miles per gallon, at least 2 gal of diesel fuel are saved for each tractor trailer load.

We can make many assumptions based on this data, but the bottom line is that providing an educational program about composting and a compost bin to get participants started does lead to reduced amounts of organic wastes going into landfill space. Participants who utilize their compost bins are using the compost to enrich the soil in their landscapes. This program is ongoing, and Pinellas County Solid Waste continues to support this program by purchasing the compost bins for distribution at the workshops.

Literature Cited

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