Composting Case Studies: Mohawk Valley Community College, Rome Branch Campus, Rome, NY

Mohawk Valley Community College's culinary education classes began a food scrap composting pilot program in the fall of 1996. As a part of its mission, Mohawk Valley Community College assumes a role of providing a forum for business and industry to explore new ideas and techniques, and strives to contribute to the quality of life for area residents.

Mohawk Valley Community College has a 60-acre campus in Utica, New York and, 20 miles away, a 20-acrecampus in Rome. Six thousand students are enrolled in the college's two-year degree and certificate programs.

Separation and Collection

The hospitality program's culinary education classes located on the Rome campus are involved in the food scrap composting program. In preparation for the project, half-hour discussions were held with these students covering the basics of composting and what types of scraps are acceptable for composting. One hundred and fifteen students participate in the culinary education classes, preparing 100 meals per day in three teaching kitchens. Currently, only scraps from the main teaching kitchen are being collected. The students use five-gallon plastic pails to collect food scraps. Approximately 300 pounds of scraps are collected each day.

The scraps are taken daily to the composting site by the building maintenance staff responsible for cleaning the kitchen. They use a pick-up truck fitted with a lift gate to transport the five-gallon buckets. Using a pitchfork, the scraps are mixed with wood chips provided by a local utility company, incorporated into the existing compost pile, and covered with more wood chips. A three to one ratio of wood chips to food scraps is used in the layering process.

Compost Method

The scraps and chips are formed into a static pile approximately 10 feet high by 12 feet wide by 20 feet long, constructed on a 20 foot by 20 foot gravel pad on a two-acre site. The pile is not turned since the piles were layered and covered with a layer of chips to act as a biofilter. With proper stacking, the air circulation in the piles allows them to compost passively. This method worked well until the compost pile was mistaken for a pile of woodchips by an outside contractor and bulldozed to make equipment storage space. Bob Clemente, manager of the food scrap composting project, thinks that had the pile not been bulldozed, it would have taken less than six months to produce finished compost. Clemente plans to start the program again by constructing a three-bin unit near the kitchen dumpster. The plan is to have the college's masonry classes build concrete bins approximately 6-8 feet by 6-8 feet by 5 feet high. Clemente estimates that the three-bin system should provide enough capacity to handle all of the food scraps generated on the Rome Campus. The proximity of the compost site to the college buildings will allow the compost project to be used as an educational tool by the Environmental Science classes on campus. Finished compost will be used in landscaping projects on campus. Plans are also being made to compost scraps from the Utica campus' dining facilities on another site.

Clemente says that they did not encounter any real problems with the project until the contractor bulldozed it. An odor was noticeable when the pile was opened for incorporation of more scraps, but not at any other time. He recommends educating the campus community about the composting project (especially outside contractors!) to avoid contamination problems and misinformation.

Savings

The food scrap composting program adds to the students' education by demonstrating alternatives to traditional food scrap disposal methods and promoting sound environmental practices. Since the trained chefs will work in many different locations, there is potential for them to start composting programs in many different places. In addition, the program is a cost saving measure for the college. To date 4500 pounds of food scraps have been collected-saving the college about $175 in tipping fees.

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