

Current Compost System and Pilot Composting Project

The University of Kansas's current compost system includes landscape waste, such as grass clippings, tree branches, leaves, and old flower beds. "We use what we collect on campus," Michael Lang, KU's Facilities Operations Landscaping Director, said. The waste is piled in windrows on West Campus in an old tree nursery, an ideal large, secluded location. The piles are turned regularly and aren't bagged unless it rains. An annual average 4800 cubic feet of leaves and grass clippings is collected on campus, with a third to a half of it actually being broken down into organic matter to be used as compost. About 3200 cubic feet of trees is gathered yearly and made into wood chips. The compost is then used within the University, such as the construction of West Campus and for annual flower beds. "Composting is profitable because if we didn't use it we'd have to purchase it from an outside source. It cuts down on landfill tip fees," Lang said. Though compost material is generally gathered from the campus, the microburst last year prompted KU's Facilities Operations to collect tree remnants from those in the community in the football stadium parking lot. "We made sure to let people know that it would be used on campus as wood chips," Lang said. About 24,000 cubic feet of tree material was collected last year, five times as much as the usual amount, providing the University with plenty of wood chips to be distributed across the campus. "We will profit from composting as long as we have an area to do it," Lang said, "we will continue to save money on landfill tip fee charges by using what we compost on campus, and keeping it at KU."

While the University of Kansas has been effectively composting landscape waste, the large amount of prepackaged and frozen food served on campus makes it too difficult to compost food waste. "We thought about compost 3 or 4 years ago as a possibility, but we've changed over the years like all food services across the nation," Nona Golledge, Director of KU Dining

Services, said. Almost everything on the cafeteria's menu comes already prepared, so parts of the food you would compost is not included such as lettuce scraps. As for the scraps off students' plates, Golledge feels that separating compostable waste would require lots of labor. "I observed the scraps off students' plates are intermingled. It would take too long to separate it out, so it'd be difficult," Golledge said. It seems like using so many prepackaged ingredients would reduce the quality of the food, but Golledge feels that it does not. "More companies are realizing that they can store natural, organic food, prepackage or freeze them, making it easier for us and still maintain the quality of the food," Golledge said. Therefore, KU Dining Services has no plans to drastically change its current system because it saves a large amount of time and money by investing in mostly prepackaged ingredients.

Though the University of Kansas does not currently compost food waste, it once did for a couple years within two scholarship halls. In January 1997, Lawrence's Resource Conservation and Recycling (RCR) compiled a pilot food waste composting project. They then asked the University of Kansas if it would be interested in embarking on the project to reduce food bills in scholarship halls and in turn, reduce waste disposal costs. Both the University's Facilities Operations and animal care facility agreed to work with the RCR staff. Representatives from other universities, Carol Shanklin and Chuck Marr of Kansas State University and Larry Wilhelm of Texas, provided technical support for setting up the project. Before beginning the compost project, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment had to make sure that KU would be within State solid waste regulations if it began composting food waste. The RCR then drafted a proposal and site plan for the Bureau of Waste Management's approval. On March 26, 1997, the plan was fully approved and ready to be implemented (Environmental Stewardship Program).

With the Bureau's approval, the RCR and Facilities Operations Landscape Department now needed to find an isolated site for the windrow, a place to pile the compost. They found an area on Campus West close to University's fill dirt and windrows for the campus's landscape waste. The RCR then gained approval from Student Housing to ask one of the scholarship halls, Douthart Hall, if they would like to participate in the pilot. They educated Douthart residents about correct sorting techniques and helped them create a collection schedule. To assist the Hall in collecting food waste, five gallon buckets were donated and informational sheets were posted. The residents were finally able to put the pilot into action on March 28, 1997 (Environmental Stewardship Program).

The windrow was both a carbon and nitrogen mix. Donations from the local Kansas Power and Light's Tree-trimming Department provided two loads of wood chips as a source of carbon. The animal care unit provided an unlimited supply of carbon, animal bedding composed of aspen tree shavings. Together, these two materials established a good carbon base with the food waste as a nitrogen source. A trench was created in the middle of the windrow for the food waste, which allowed it to be slowly incorporated into the carbon mixture. On April 21, 1997, Earth Day, the first 65 pounds of food waste was successfully added to quarter yard bed of shredded wood chips and 100 pounds of animal bedding (Environmental Stewardship Program). The windrow continued to be maintained by RCR recycling technicians.

With the project working successfully, the RCR asked another scholarship hall, Grace Pearson, to begin participating. They agreed and began separating food waste in the beginning of the Spring 1998 semester. Both Douthart and Grace Pearson continued to participate in the pilot throughout 1998 until the area was lost due to construction. A total of three cubic yards of compost was collected. The compost was used in a xeriscaping project located at Burt Hall and

for gardens in front of the scholarship halls (Environmental Stewardship Program). The project was abandoned, though students like junior Talitha Jennison have attempted to revive it. “I talked to the director of KU because I was interested in getting it started, but I found out that compost was already established for grass clipping and leaves,” Jennison said. Food seemed too difficult for Jennison to begin composting because of strict state laws, so she considered looking into community service organizations who would be able to give the food from the scholarship halls to the less fortunate. “That would have been my next step, but I got busy with school so I thought I could do it after break,” Jennison said. With the conclusion of the pilot in 1998, leftover scholarship hall food is simply being thrown out with the trash, and with no future compost projects on the horizon, will continue to be wasted.

Bibliography

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