

## **Rural/Small Town Organics Management Case Study Irvington, New York "Your Leaves: Love 'Em and Leave 'Em" Program"**

### **Background**

[Irvington](#) is a village in Westchester County, New York (population 6,468). In June 2008, the Irvington Climate Protection Task Force (CPTF) issued a [comprehensive report](#), with a recommendation to create a Green Policy Task Force and appoint a Village Sustainability Coordinator.



In 2010, the Irvington Board of Trustees created the Irvington Green Policy Task Force (GPTF) in order to move the Village more effectively toward the goals set out by the CPTF. The GPTF includes a broad representation of the Village, including representatives from the Irvington schools, community groups, and other associations or organizations from within the Village, including several Master Gardener members.

The mission of the GPTF is to study and recommend to the Village Board of Trustees, policies, procedures, programs, actions and possible legislation that advance the goal of sustainability and climate protection. Building upon the work of the CPTF report, the goal of the GPTF is to put into practice initiatives related to: public awareness and education, waste management, water management, transportation, land use, and energy.

In carrying out its Mission, the Green Policy Task Force may:

- Work with other Village committees and community organizations
- Create subcommittees to undertake specific projects, which may involve fund-raising
- Respond to specific requests from the Board of Trustees or the Village Administrator
- Initiate work on issues the Task Force determines to be timely and pressing
- Seek grants and funding opportunities
- Request Village funding for feasibility studies, administrative support or specific initiatives
- Work with neighboring municipalities, Westchester County, New York State, or Federal agencies

Indicative of the importance of recycling to the Village, Irvington earned a Certificate of Achievement in 2009 from Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino, commending the Irvington Department of Public Works for producing comprehensive solid waste and recycling information materials for their residents.

The Irvington GPTF's initiative "[Your Leaves: Love 'Em and Leave 'Em](#)" is a highly successful ongoing public education and outreach program for homeowners, landscape business owners and work crews, and municipal personnel, as well as other municipalities around Westchester County. Initiated by Irvington, the campaign has been adopted throughout Westchester County.

### ***Planning and Program Description***

Love 'Em and Leave 'Em (LELE) is a program initiated by the Irvington [Green Policy Task Force](#) (GPTF), a citizen volunteer task force.

The GPTF reviewed the 2008 Irvington Climate Protection Task Force Report recommendations on reducing solid waste and in consultation with the Irvington DPW concluded that retaining leaves onsite and mulching or mowing leaves in place on public and private properties throughout the Village would have significant environmental and economic benefits. Reducing the impact of curbside leaf pickup through promotion of onsite leaf management was something that could be relatively easily undertaken and have a positive impact.



Leaf management before  
the leaf mulching campaign

The Task Force concluded that promotion of mulching leaves in place could substantially reduce the amount of yard waste entering the municipal waste stream, decreasing the costs to the Village of fall leaf collection and disposal, reducing tipping fees (charged by the County for disposal of the Village's leaves), along with lowering transportation costs and fuel usage to collect and transport the leaves, and reducing town public works requirements for collecting and transporting the leaves.

Leaf mulching in place was also encouraged as a way to reduce flooding risk resulting from clogged storm drains, as well as lowering the cost to the Village of clearing clogged drains; reducing the traffic hazard caused by piles of leaves in roadways; decreasing the need for leaf collection vehicles in Irvington neighborhoods; reducing phosphate runoff in to waterways from disposal of leaves in streets, resulting in improved general water quality; improved quality and health of lawns and turf, through the benefits of onsite mulching to improve the capacity of soil to retain water; and, improved resiliency of turf and plantings through increased nutrients and biological complexity in soil. Mulching leaves onsite reduces the need for commercial fertilizers, is easier and faster than traditional methods of leaf removal, and returns nutrients to lawns and gardens.

The benefits of mulch mowing leaves advocated by the Task Force were quick to catch on as neighborhoods around Irvington began to embrace the "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em" campaign. Support and advocacy by a small number of local landscape professionals experienced in LELE techniques were essential to advancing the program. Leaf mulching was promoted as both eco-friendly and cost-effective, especially for landscapers and large landowners. Irvington Parks Department was also cited as an example for the leaf mulching effort because the Department had successfully followed the practice within Village parks for several years (even before the LELE was embraced by the Village).

In September of 2011, the Irvington Board of Trustees unanimously adopted a mulch mowing resolution in support of the [Love 'Em and Leave 'Em initiative](#). The Initiative encouraged all Village departments, property owners, residents, condominium, and cooperative managers/boards to "help reduce the costs of unnecessary leaf collection and disposal by the Village and make optimal use of this rich organic resource by mulching and/or composting leaves on their own property." The resolution also encouraged landscapers to implement the leaf mulching practice on their clients' properties and encouraged residents to consult the Village website for more information about onsite leaf mulching, "how to" videos, and testimonials from local landscapers, property owners, and Village staff on the many benefits of this economical and environmentally beneficial method of leaf management.

In 2012, the GPTF was requested by Westchester County to include grasscycling as a part of the program. Westchester County also awarded a contract to the GPTF to promote onsite leaf/grass mulching throughout the county. The contract program includes “how to” trainings around the county, onsite landscaper consultations, and an informative website ([www.leleny.org](http://www.leleny.org)). In 2013, the GPTF received grants from New Rochelle and Scarsdale to promote the LELE campaign in their communities as well.

### ***Acceptable Materials and Program Participants***

The program promotes mulching leaves and grass in place, targeting residents, landscapers, municipal and county officials, school districts, and other properties with large turf areas, including condominiums and hospitals.

### ***Equipment***

The program recommends that home owners doing their own lawn management use a mulching lawn mower, a leaf shredder, or a leaf vacuum/shredder to mulch leaves in place.

Professional landscapers can operate their mower in the "mulching" configuration (with the deck plate shut). After-market professional-grade mulch door accessories, such as the “Vulcher 2” can also be used.



Various mulching blades, designed to maximize shredding, are also recommended. These blades are typically the same cost as a regular blade and fit all standard manufacturers' mowers, both for home lawn maintenance and professional landscapers.

### ***Cost/Funding***

Mark Gilliland of the Task Force stated, “In 2009, the Village of Irvington spent \$30,000 in leaf tipping fees alone and estimates total leaf (management) costs to be over \$100,000 each year.”<sup>1</sup> Countywide, during the fall season (October-December), more than 90% of yard trimmings handled in Westchester County is leaves. In 2010, this amounted to 60,000 tons of leaves. During the summer months (May-September), 50% of yard waste is grass clippings (more than 38,000 tons). Removal of leaves and grass from the County's waste stream could reduce total tonnage processed and transported out of the county by half, amounting to a \$4 Million in savings.<sup>2</sup>

At a municipal level, implementing a leaf mulching campaign can reduce costs through the lowering of yard waste tipping fees, labor overtime, fuel and transportation costs (from leaf collection programs), reduced specialized equipment purchase and maintenance needs, prevention of storm drain clogging, and other benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> [The Rivertowns Enterprise](#), Volume 35, Number 50. March 11, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> [Organic Waste Transfer IMA Program – Estimated Tonnage Adjusted](#). Note: Metrics for savings due to the program have been difficult to determine due to rain/snow storms that hit the region the past two years, requiring substantial collection and processing of down trees and brush.

### **Outreach and Education**

The “Your Leaves: Love ‘Em and Leave ‘Em” campaign targets a range of audiences with its message—“It’s Green and It Makes Cents.” The GPTF message of mulching-in-place saves time and money was emphasized as an important benefit of leaf mulching. The GPTF uses an attractive logo to gain visibility for its “Love Em and Leave Em” campaign.

Target audiences for the campaign:

- Homeowners (do-it-yourselfers)
- Landscapers/homeowner clients
- Municipal & county officials and personnel
- School districts
- Churches, hospitals, condos, co-ops
- Commercial properties



Current Program Logo

In addition to its message, the GPTF provides general suggestions for leaf mulching:

- Shred them with a mulching mower and leave them in place on lawn areas
- Shred them and use as mulch on borders, flower beds and tree rings
- Leave them alone in wooded areas
- Compost them in a pile or compost bin (with or without pre-shredding)

The Task Force offers a series of free trainings for homeowners, municipal DPWs, parks staff, school grounds maintenance staff, conservation advisory committees/boards, and landscape and lawn care contractors.

Through its contract with Westchester County, the GPTF promotes onsite leaf/grass mulching throughout the county. The contract program includes “how to” trainings around the county and onsite landscaper consultations. Promoting the campaign as an “Environmental & Cost-Saving Initiative of Westchester County and Local Municipalities,” the [Love 'Em and Leave 'Em](#) website has a vast amount of resources, a social media outreach component, video demos, and a public domain resource “toolkit.”

The “[LELE Toolkit](#)” contains resources for communities to develop their own local Initiative.

- Sample municipal resolution supporting mulching-in-place
- Sample letter to send to homeowners; sample letters (homeowner) clients can give to landscapers (translated into Spanish); and a sample letter landscapers can give to clients
- “Talking points” & a LELE Initiative Power Point
- Testimonial ads
- Logo files with different variations of campaign logo
- A LELE “Mulch in Place” poster & Photos
- Yard Signs & bumper stickers
- A “How To” pocket guide (bi-lingual)
- YouTube demonstration and training videos



Early Program Logo

The LELE program also promotes site sustainability issues that include support for LELE in design of client landscapes, targeting landscape architects, landscape designers, landscapers, homeowners, and planning boards. In addition, the LELE website includes a list of landscapers who state that they provide the mulching mowing service.



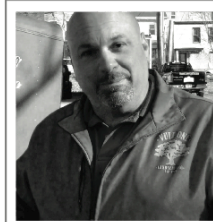
## Results & Impacts

On Earth Day 2012, Westchester County presented waste reduction recycling awards to the mulch mowing initiatives in Irvington (LELE) and Bedford ("Leave Leaves Alone"). In 2013, Scarsdale and Pleasantville LELE programs were awarded (the GPTF had helped to initiate their programs).

By the fall of 2012, more than 23 municipalities in the County had endorsed and/or implemented LELE programs for residents and DPW/Parks departments.

## Lessons Learned

- Clearly define the audience for public outreach. This is typically homeowners, landscapers, and municipal parks officials. For each municipality, local conditions and constraints may require differing focus for public educational outreach.
- Don't forget outreach to large property owners such as businesses, churches, schools, and condominiums which may be major generators of organic waste.
- Encourage adoption by the local municipality of a resolution of support for the LELE initiative. At the municipal level, there can be direct cost savings and turf/landscape benefits by parks department adaptation of the methodologies.
- Find a partner in the municipality such as a Sustainability Coordinator, Green Policy working group, or a Conservation Committee/Board to help adopt, staff, and spread the local initiative. These groups are often committed volunteers.
- Establish public education for the initiative, including hands-on demonstrations and trainings for both homeowners and landscapers. Provide trainings in Spanish, as appropriate for target audiences.
- Provide onsite "consultations" for landscapers and municipal staff to allow for an interactive demonstration with a question and answer period to address specific issues and situational concerns. In some cases, the GPTF undertook an onsite consultation/training in the first year and a second visit was done the following year to review and answer questions.
- "Train the Trainers" - ensure that whoever is being used for public training or consultations has working experience with LELE techniques and methodologies.
- Use appropriate equipment for each targeted audience. For example, for a workshop or onsite demonstration of LELE to homeowners, use of a name-brand quality mulching mower is more effective than use of a wide-carriage professional landscaper's mower.
- Set definable metrics, especially regarding tracking of potential year-to-year savings in municipal costs. If hard metrics cannot be identified, look for soft metrics to at least get started, such as working with public works departments to track how many fewer trucks were sent out to collect leaves, reduced personnel hours spent on leaf collection, etc.
- Do not promise residents that the program will result in tax savings. For municipalities, there is a cost reduction of service and tipping fees, but rather than direct tax reductions, the program is more likely to help defray budget increases over the long-term. DPW or Parks staff will have more time to apply themselves to other pending public works projects since they are not spending time collecting and hauling leaves.
- Provide "test plots" (public sites) where the LELE process and results can be easily seen by local residents.
- LELE yard signs help to bring visual attention to properties that are making use of LELE mulching-in-place techniques.



"I started shredding leaves and leaving them on my clients' properties. The lawns look healthier. The soil is better. I save time and money not having to blow, vacuum, dump leaves.

It's a no-brainer! Even my father (who's had his own landscaping company for a good many years) is convinced. He's adopting the practice, too."

- Anthony Vulpone, Vulpone Landscape & Lawn Maintenance




### **Our Leaves: Love 'Em And Leave 'Em**

For more information and "how to" -> [www.irvingtonny.gov/green](http://www.irvingtonny.gov/green)

Paid for by the Irvington Green Policy Task Force with a Clean Air, Cool Planet grant.

- Training and public outreach is not just a one-time thing, but should be planned to recur each year to help speed up adoption rates. Training can occur in early spring for landscapers, but the major focus of attention will be starting in late summer or early fall as leaf drop season approaches. Training in neighborhoods (private lawns), parks, one-time and recurring public events (festivals, farmers markets) are all workable venues.
- Use whatever channels are available for marketing outreach regarding LELE initiative and training. This includes local papers, local cable, municipal press conferences, press releases and emailing lists, placing how-to info on the back of DPW calendars, public posters and handouts, etc.
- It's essential to not expect participants to achieve 100% program compliance, but to emphasize the importance of trying mulching or mowing in place in order to achieve some reductions in municipal leaf collection.
- Common messaging and branding is most effective. Encouraging use of LELE Toolkit resources including customization (and municipal "co-branding") achieves this goal. Messaging is important to clarify to participants what "mulching" in place means in relationship to leaves and grass. Residents and landscapers have preconceived notions of the term "mulching." Using "mowing- in- place" and keeping leaves and grass "onsite" are important terms to use. Many residents and landscapers do not feel they can compost, so it is important to distinguish between mulching or mowing in place vs. composting.
- Work to develop a non-adversarial relationship with local landscapers and their professional organizations. LELE is not about legislating more restrictions, etc., but rather about spreading the word on a useful (time saving and environmentally sound) set of techniques that are easy to adopt without high overhead. It's up to each landscaper to determine whether the LELE methodologies make sense for clients, and how best to position/market them as "green." It is important that the campaign not be an "anti-leaf blowing" initiative, but instead advocates the "right use of right tool in right way and right time." For example, leaf blowers do not have to be operated at the highest speed all the time and should be turned off when not in use.
- It's important to respect different perspectives of professionals, work with them to work with clients and work with clients to respect landscaping service providers.



"I have always believed in the 'power of mulching' my leaves onto my lawn, whether I was mowing myself or my landscaper was doing it for me. As the Mayor of Irvington, I am encouraging all resident to adopt this environmentally sound and fiscally responsible approach to fall leaf management.

The more people that do so, the less money the Village will spend to collect leaves. If you or your landscaper are not convinced that leaf mulching works, call me!"

- Brian Smith, Mayor of Irvington

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## Conclusion

The Village of Irvington's catchy "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em!" campaign promoting mulch mowing of leaves and grass has spread throughout Westchester County. The program provides a model for low-cost organics reduction efforts in rural and small town communities.

The comprehensive campaign targets a range of audiences with its message—"It's Green and It Makes Cents." The Task Force's mulching-in-place saves time and money is emphasized as an important benefit to participants.



**LEAVES & GRASS:  
WE LOVE 'EM  
AND LEAVE 'EM**

**Watch This Yard - Leaf and  
Grass Mulching In Progress**

**For More Information: [www.LELENY.org](http://www.LELENY.org)**

The LELE Toolkit provides communities with sample resolutions, promotional materials, and other resources to develop a leaf mulching campaign. These materials are applicable for the promotion of grasscycling as well.

Irvington's GPTF created a program to educate and advocate an idea that many have been doing for a long time. An idea that if promoted effectively can have a substantial impact in the reduction of organics collected through municipal curbside or drop-off programs. The positive impacts, from reduced costs to environmental benefits, are significant.

Appreciation goes to MJ Wilson Love 'Em & Leave 'Em founding member, Mark Gilliland, Village of Irvington Board of Trustees and LELE founding member, and Marianne S. Gallagher-Petronella, Director of Resource Management, Westchester County Department of Environmental Facilities/Recycling Office, their contribution to writing this case study. (Photo credits: Mark Gilliland and the Irvington Green Policy Task Force/LELE website)

For more information, contact the Love 'Em & Leave 'Em campaign via email at [info@leleny.org](mailto:info@leleny.org) or visit their website at [www.leleny.org](http://www.leleny.org).

The Northeast Recycling Council (NERC) is a non-profit organization that conducts research, hands-on projects, training, and outreach on issues associated with source reduction, recycling, composting, environmentally preferable purchasing, and decreasing the toxicity of the solid waste stream.

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