



Volunteer Engagement & Retention

This exercise is intended to put you “in the shoes” of your compost team volunteers. While people differ about the types of volunteer experiences they desire, there are key elements that tend to be universal in making a volunteer experience memorable (in a good way) and that foster long-term volunteer involvement.

What Do Volunteers Want?

They want you to be prepared for them.

- Provide what’s needed: the right tools for the job, instructions, visual guides, etc.
- Prepare a job description: include what they will be doing, what they need to bring (if anything), how to dress, approximately how long the job will take, etc.



Photo Credit. VCGN; Compost training at Thetford, Vermont Elementary School

They want to feel welcomed.

- Foster a warm, friendly, hospitable environment.
- Get to know compost team volunteers & foster an inclusive environment that encourages engagement between team members.

Have you ever volunteered before?

Picture your least favorite volunteering memory.

- What was it about the experience that didn’t work for you?
- What would you have changed or wanted more of?

Now, envision a favorite volunteering memory.

- What about the experience worked well for you?
- What kept you coming back?

They want adequate training.

- Hold an on-site orientation for volunteers. Make it fun and interesting so that people remember training highlights (e.g., a compost scavenger hunt).
- Provide clear expectations about what the volunteer duties entail, as well as the end-result or objective and why it is important).
- Offer support—be available for questions; consider having experienced & inexperienced volunteers work together, at least initially.
- Have educational tools & instructional signage available on-site.

They want to do interesting work.

- Many volunteers are looking for a meaningful experience—explain the impact of their work, the importance of diverting food scraps from landfills, the benefits of composting, etc.
- Match volunteers with jobs they’ll enjoy & be successful at.
- Keep it fun by rotating jobs, playing team building games, & allowing people to work together, if desired.

- Combine volunteer tasks with the prospect of learning a new skill.
- Allow long-time volunteers the opportunity to try new tasks or expand into leadership.

They want to know the commitment involved.

- Offer a variety of opportunities with different time commitments—project-oriented vs. ongoing, weekly vs. monthly, weekday vs. weekend, etc.
- Consider offering opportunities that fit into people’s existing lifestyles & schedules. For example, family-oriented workdays on weekends or after school hours, or flexible days/times to accommodate volunteer scheduling needs.

They want to be appreciated.

- Recognize your volunteers in-person & publicly.
- Personalize volunteer “thank you’s when possible & appropriate.



Photo Cr.: Vermont Community Gardens Network

They want to be socially connected.

- Encourage team building & interaction by pairing volunteers & scheduling group work parties.
- Consider how to inspire volunteer opportunities to be more than just work. For example, combine workdays with social potlucks or other community events that are fun.

They want you to communicate with them clearly and often.

- Keep up a regular connection with your volunteers; communicate team announcements, progress, opportunities, expectations, feedback, etc.
- Make sure there is a simple & effective way for volunteers to communicate with project leadership & with each other.
- Find ways of communicating that are easy & best meet the needs of compost team volunteers (e.g. phone, email, bulletin board, meeting, social media, and newsletter). Understand that not all volunteers will necessarily want to use email or social media.

Adapted from [Vermont Community Garden Network](#) and “What do Your Volunteers Want? 10 Ways to Make Them Happy,” by Joanne Fritz.

Other Community Compost Tip Sheets to consult: [Community Composting Volunteer Training & Orientation](#); [Community Composting Volunteer Job Planning & Recruitment](#).

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