

CLEAN YOUR PLATE:

AN EVENT PLANNER'S GUIDE TO COMPOSTING

ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNICATION ARE THE NAME OF THE GAME WHEN IT COMES TO DIVERTING ORGANIC MATERIALS AT SPECIAL EVENTS. HOW DO YOU CAPTURE FOOD SCRAPS, INCREASE PARTICIPATION AND ENSURE ALL MATERIAL IS HAULED AND PROCESSED EFFICIENTLY? OUR AUTHOR PROVIDES BEST PRACTICES FOR EVENTS LARGE AND SMALL.

BY ATHENA LEE BRADLEY

Around the world, a growing number of special event organizers are “greening” their events. An essential component for going green and approaching zero waste is the diversion of food scraps and service ware. As much as half, or more, of the special event waste stream is compostable.

The Northeast Recycling Council (NERC) has developed best management practices and models for source reduction, recycling and composting at special events that are applicable nationally and for any size event. Composting pilots have demonstrated different approaches to designing and implementing diversion programs for pre- and post-consumer food, as well as compostable service ware and soiled paper goods.

Why composting?

Virtually all communities – from small towns to large cities – have special events. Whether a block party or music festival, events offer

a perfect opportunity for hands-on education about composting. Special events present a microcosm of our society: People gather, they do activities together and they generate waste.

Composting can be successful at virtually any type of special event. Events frequently offer recycling, a very laudable undertaking. However, taking that next step – to implement collection of compostables – often seems daunting.

Admittedly, the tasks to implementing successful event composting are often unfamiliar and can be challenging: finding a hauler, convincing vendors to only use compostable service ware and securing more volunteers. Composting at special events doesn't usually happen without extremely dedicated organizers or outside intervention from solid waste experts, and often both.

Getting started

Pre-event preparation is best handled by a coordinator, or committee, who can work directly with the event manager. Ideally, particularly for

large events, a pilot composting project will be undertaken at the event, before scaling it up to the entire operation. The pilot should include a vendor survey, including outreach to vendors about event composting and the use of compostable service ware. An event food waste management plan, including estimated volumes of compostable materials, can be put together based on vendor survey results and the pilot. This plan can then be used to guide future composting.

The following tasks should be undertaken at the start of the event planning season:

- Find a hauler/processor for compostable materials,
- Determine a policy on vendor use of compostable service ware, and
- Integrate the compost collection with recycling and solid waste.



Strolling of the Heifers Expo, Brattleboro, Vermont. Windham County Solid Waste District provides composting, recycling, and trash collection stations.

Finding a hauler and composter

Consult the event's recycling hauler and other haulers in the area. Talk with local solid waste officials. Smaller towns may find a farmer willing to accept materials. Depending on the size of the event, materials might even be self-hauled using a pickup truck or trailer.

Larger events will want to consider issuing a bid or a request for proposal for a package of service provisions (waste, recycling and composting).

Vendor communication – early and often

The most effective special event composting occurs when vendors are required to only use ASTM/BPI compostable service ware and the event prohibits the use of non-compostable/non-recyclable service ware.

Talking with vendors and phasing in this policy will gain their support. Make it optional the first year, or offer a discount for those vendors that only use compostable service ware.

Hauler/composter questions

- Verify materials accepted – paper, compostable plastics, liquids?
- Does the hauler provide collection containers? What type? How many?
- Are materials in compostable bags acceptable?
- Is a contract required?
- What are the fees? Will the hauler and composter consider sponsor exchange?
- How will materials be collected – by Dumpster or by truck?
- What is the percent contamination allowed?

Clearly outline acceptable service ware in the vendor contract and in all outreach. Be sure to inform health inspectors about the compost collection.

Other vendor tips:

- Suggest “no waste” food service options (e.g., finger foods) and the use of bulk condiment dispensers.
- Provide vendors with food scrap collec-

- tion buckets and convenient collection.
- Promote “green vendors” through booth signage and other recognition.

Green stations

Convenient and visible “green stations” – compost, recycling and trash – need to be placed in food vendor and other high traffic areas. Collection containers can be anything from wheeled carts to regular trash receptacles or five gallon buckets. Collection works best when the containers are easily distinguished from recycling and trash containers – either a different shape or color.

Place big, bright, easy-to-read signage overhead or at eye level on each station, with containers labeled on the top and sides. Simple and consistent signage is most effective: “Food Waste, Plates, Cups.” Attach sample compostable service ware to signage and containers for added visual effect.

Eliminating “free-standing” trash cans not associated with the green stations will encourage recycling and composting.

The collection system

Collection ease relies on setting-up a parallel system to event recycling and trash collection.

Examples of successful special event composting

SolarFest, Tinmouth, Vermont

Approximately 9,000 people attend this three-day event which features workshops, exhibitors, children's activities, and entertainment.

NERC worked with event organizers to develop a food waste management plan, outlining the necessary tasks for successful adoption of composting. Organizers required food vendors to use compostable service ware. NERC provided vendor outreach information, volunteer training materials and promotional suggestions, along with onsite technical assistance, during the 2009 event to assist in setting up the zero waste stations, training monitors, assisting in monitoring the stations, and troubleshooting.

An estimated 1,400 pounds of food waste, soiled paper and compostable service ware was collected for composting, along with 780 pounds of recyclables, during the 2009 event. Trash cans were limited to the portable toilet areas. Compostable materials were hauled by the Rutland County Solid Waste District staff to their compost site. The event continues to be zero waste.



SolarFest, Tinmouth, Vermont

Coast Day, Lewes, Delaware

Coast Day is hosted by the University of Delaware, College of Earth, Ocean, and Environment and the Delaware Sea Grant College Program. Attendance is usually around 10,000 for this event, which features chowder tasting contests, cook-offs and exhibits. Event organizers worked with NERC staff in 2011 to implement composting.

Five green stations were set-up around the main food vendor area and the cook-off tents. High school students and University Green Team members monitored the stations throughout the day. Full bags of compost, recyclables, and trash were collected by the University crew and compostables were hauled to Blue Hen Compost Facility for processing.



Coast Day, Lewes, Delaware

Garlic and Arts Festival, Orange, Massachusetts

Some 10,000 people attend this two-day event to enjoy entertainment, hundreds of booths, workshops and more. The Festival has been a zero waste event for six years. (Full disclosure: the author volunteered with event organizers to implement composting eight years ago and continues to help coordinate compost activities.)

Vendors are required to only use compostable service ware. Volunteers staff five zero waste stations throughout the event. The stations are two-color – green for compost and yellow for recycling, with circular holes through which materials are tossed into lined barrels (compostable bags for compost; clear bags for recyclables). Visible, eye-level signage is connected to the bins, with sample service ware products integrated into the design.

In 2011, 115 bags of compostable material was collected from the event, weighing approximately a ton.



Garlic and Arts Festival, Orange, Massachusetts

Equal visibility and support must be given to composting as is given to recycling and solid waste management.

Collection containers tend to fill up quickly due to the bulkiness of service ware. Depending on the volume generated, attendee traffic, and the event footprint, a wheeled cart or motorized golf cart will be needed for moving collected materials to a consolidation point.

The location of the collection Dumpster or truck (the “service area”) must be pre-arranged with the hauler and accessible for easy dumping of materials. Some events will find it helpful to establish staging areas for temporary storage of full bags or carts until these can be emptied at the service area. These can be located behind vendor booths, trees, portable toilets or other out-of-the way locations. Have an easily accessible area for storing compostable bags and volunteer supplies, including litter pick-up sticks, disposable gloves and sanitizing solution.

The compost team

An essential key to successful composting is active monitoring of the green stations.

One monitor per station ensures that:

- Attendees are educated, not frustrated.
- Contamination of collected materials is reduced.

- The need to sort through collected materials is eliminated.

Compost coordinator duties include:

- Set-up (containers in place, signage, etc.).
- Train, assist and relieve station monitors.
- Oversee removal of full bags or carts to the service area.
- Vendor training and monitoring.
- Troubleshooting.


The compost coordinator must provide station monitors with an overview of what is compostable and what isn't, as well as composting/recycling logistics, and safety (e.g, how to lift, not sticking hands directly into containers, etc.). Monitor duties include: providing a brief “compost talk” to event attendees and helping them sort materials; notifying the coordinator when bins need emptying; and keeping the stations clean. Most event attendees will be unfamiliar with compostable plastics, so it is important that monitors let them know that the items are made from corn (or potato starch, bamboo, etc.), and that, yes, they are compostable at a commercial operation.

Larger events may want to assign “floaters” to help in emptying containers and moving full bags or carts to the staging or service area.

Clean-up is busy and volunteers need

to be pre-assigned to help remove collection bags/carts to the service area or leave in designated locations for hauler pick-up; set-up for the next day (if the event continues) or breakdown stations if the event is over; and picking up litter.

Publicity

Just as with recycling, promotion is effective at both helping to educate attendees and also gaining recognition for the event's greening efforts. Use the event's website and social media, press releases, fliers/posters, green station locations on maps and stage announcements to get the word out. 

Athena Lee Bradley is projects manager for the Northeast Recycling Council, Inc. She can be contacted at athena@nerc.org. NERC worked with event organizers to implement recycling and composting at several different types of events, including festivals, food shows, catered events, and agricultural fairs. Resources from these experiences are available on NERC's Special Events Recycling & Composting website – <http://tinyurl.com/NERC-SECompost>.

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