

Let's Stop Wasting Waste

We all have (compostable) kitchen waste. In fact, it accounts for 15% of our solid waste. You know, the last bit of last week's baked beans. Scrapings from the children's dinner plates. The outer leaves of lettuce heads. Those forgotten green beans that went 'south'. And who hasn't had rotten tomatoes and fruit to dispose of at one time or another. And it all adds up. Arlington sends almost 2,000 tons (about one-sixth of our incinerated waste stream) of compostable food waste off to be burned at the incinerator in North Andover every year.

So why is incineration a poor way to dispose of kitchen waste? Well first, it costs us about \$140,000 a year to burn this material, the equivalent to the annual salary of two or three teachers/public safety officers. Next, while the North Andover facility uses the heat produced from burning our trash (including our compostable kitchen waste) to generate electricity; given that food waste includes a lot of water it makes it a poor fuel (sort of like trying to use wet wood to start a winter fire). Thus some of the energy value of our total waste stream is wasted burning water.

A better way is to turn food scraps into valuable garden soil simply by composting them. Many residents already have compost bins in their yards that are used for this very purpose. In the bins, residents mix food waste with fallen leaves, grass clippings and other yard waste. The bins are covered to keep out rodents. After the mixture decays, thanks to the work of microorganisms, the household gardener works the rich black compost into the garden soil. Compost purchased from stores may not be of the same quality since you are relying on the manufacturer to properly list the materials or process they used. But most important, if you turn food scraps into compost, then nothing is being wasted at all.

There are additional advantages to back yard composting. No longer will your trash barrel smell of rotting garbage. When properly mixed with other plant matter from your yard, a compost bin has a very mild odor. Furthermore, if you use a black plastic bag to dispose of your trash (instead of a trash barrel), you will avoid the cost of heavy-duty plastic garbage bags.

I hope you are a little curious now and wondering how to get started. Compost bins are available from our Public Works Department at modest cost. More elaborate bins are available from garden suppliers. And the adult education and senior center regularly offer scheduled 'How to compost' classes. The Town has some helpful tips and resources on the Trash & Recycling page (www.arlingtonma.gov/recycle). So there is no reason not to try!

But what if you don't have space for a compost bin? You might consider sharing a bin installed in a neighbor's or a friend's larger, more spacious back yard. This could be a shared project with benefits including developing and enhancing neighborhood spirit. First compost. Then maybe you will move onto a shared vegetable gardening

project. Still not quite convinced and don't think having your own or sharing a composting bin will work for you? No worries, there are compost services which, for a fee, will collect your food waste weekly and have it composted.

Composting is a simple process that gives back valuable garden soil, reduces smelly garbage bags, and lowers the cost we all share to incinerate our waste. So give composting a try.

Pete Howard
Arlington Recycling Committee