

Sustainability & Social Justice

Composting at Antioch University New England

Our Story

The Antioch University New England (AUNE) composting program began in 2005 as a volunteer student-led initiative. It became operationalized as an institutional practice during the 2008-09 academic year under the leadership of AUNE's Sustainability & Social Justice Committee. The program's first step was to create a Solid Waste Coordinator work-study position and to assess the system, as it was at that time, in order to identify needed upgrades.

In October 2008, the campus had two closed compost bins and one open bin constructed with pallets and chicken wire. All of these bins were, and continue to be, located outside along a fence line next to open green space. Students were using three small, green compost buckets to collect compost in three locations within the AUNE building.

During the next year, AUNE increased the number of bins used to collect compost (both pre- and post-plate waste), switched to using stainless-steel foot-pedal collection cans, built two more open compost bins, and added an additional closed compost bin to accommodate an increased amount of waste collected.

During 2009, more than one-and-a-half tons of food waste was collected and composted proving that little stuff really adds up! In fact, from November 2008 (when the compost started being weighed weekly) to March 2010, there was an increase from fifty pounds of compost in one month to more than 520 pounds!

Where We Are Now

As of March 2010, an average of one hundred pounds of compostable material per week is collected. Contributors include the small café on campus that produces food waste on a daily basis, and a variety of students, faculty, and staff who are on campus each day. Though no vermi-composting system exists currently, there are plans to develop something in the future to be used as an educational resource.

Apart from the Solid Waste Coordinator position, AUNE spends little to no money on the composting program. The only purchase to date has been the seven stainless steel bins for collection; costing approximately twenty dollars each. AUNE received a donation of used pallets, spare chicken wire, and nails from a community member and the City of Keene's solid waste transfer station donated the closed compost bin. The committee is researching more formalized composting systems that can accommodate more volume. In early 2010, AUNE converted to using biocompostable ware for campus events at which food is served. The use of biocompostable ware dictates the need for more heat and space for composting in the future. One built system that is being considered is the Earthtub, which appears to be an effective, in-vessel composting system.

Encouraging People to Compost

In terms of encouraging people to compost, AUNE's Sustainability and Social Justice Committee held two Carbon Counts: You Can Too speaker series events during 2009 related to composting (for AUNE community members and the public). Signs have been created to place on all compost bins that let people know what is compostable within the system and what is not. AUNE does not compost dairy products, meat, or oils due to our system's simplistic nature. These items really start to smell and attract more animals! AUNE's Garden Committee has been enlisted to help improve the efficiency of the compost collection and plans are underway to upgrade our composting capacity.

The Solid Waste Coordinator also produces a newsletter, written from the perspective of the compost, called: A Word From Your Compost. A volunteer illustrated a picture of a compost pile and that is used as the mascot. The newsletter includes what is happening with the compost (both the collection and the maintenance of the piles), resources that people can use such as Compost 101-At Home Composting, and a link to the Keene solid waste transfer station with information on what can and cannot be recycled there, etc. The newsletter is posted on AUNE's internal online discourse system and people really love reading it! Making composting seem easy, fun, and beneficial is the way to go!

Tips to Start Your Own Compost Program

Here are a few recommendations for starting a composting system of your own:

- Determine where you want to collect your food waste. If you will be collecting post-plate food waste, or food waste that has made contact with a consumer, check with your state's solid waste management system to see if there are any regulations regarding this waste.
- Perform a solid waste audit for your campus. Not all waste audits are the same. During Fall 2009, AUNE's Solid Waste Coordinator led one at our campus, focusing on emptying AUNE's one dumpster, sorting and weighing its contents. Other schools will arrange to collect all of the waste from the dorms and other buildings, while others concentrate just on the cafeteria waste. Click here to go to a website with good information on where to start.
- Once you have an idea about where most of your waste is coming from and you determine how waste could be collected, look into composting systems that would work for you. Vermi-composting systems are pickier about what goes into them due to the biology of the worms, whereas regular composting systems can accommodate a wider variety of food and paper waste. A case study on vermi-composting that highlights what one institution did to set up their system.
- Seek out an appropriate faculty or administrative advisor who can help guide you through this process.
- Check out the following resources for the basics on worm composting:
 - Worms Eat My Garbage by Mary Appelhof
 - Recycling with Worms-The Red Wiggler Connection by Shelly Grossman and Melissa Weitzel
- For additional resources and information, check to see if there are any farms nearby that would be willing to help you get started.
- Consideration should also be given to starting a pilot dorm compost collection or vermi-composting bin.

Best of luck in your composting endeavors!

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