

The Ballston Spa Compost Initiative

My wife and I are long-time gardeners with extensive flowers, shrubs, vegetables and fruits; our home is known for its gardens. Although we compost, we've been known to purchase several cubic yards each spring. In 2018 I ramped up my composting by teaming with a small but popular and busy niche restaurant for their vegetable, fruit and coffee/tea food scraps only – no meat, fish, processed or prepared foods, oils, etc.

I use 5-gallon buckets, and at the time was utilizing standard push/pull tops; I have since switched to screw-on tops to minimize spill potential during auto transport, they wear better than the less expensive standard tops, and they contain odor better with seals.

Restaurants/food pantries are given buckets, and call or text me when they're ready for pick up and exchange with clean buckets. Subsequently the 'pilot' niche restaurant owner opened a new market bistro next door and the combined establishments average 3 to 4 buckets every 7-10 days during the busy summer and fall growing seasons. Still not a lot for my 4-bin composter needs or capacity. I also have a separate heap I use for landscape waste materials, brush, twigs, weeds, trimmings, etc.

At about this time my interests turned to keeping food scraps out of landfills instead of just making compost. I created a small brochure, set up basic written guidelines and went door to door to most of the restaurants in my village offering to take their food scraps. I was unsuccessful in attracting the larger restaurants - their issues were the 'work' of separating the vegs/fruits from the other [busy] kitchen waste (i.e., meats, processed food), and storing buckets.

While in one of my favorite village coffee house haunts, a fortuitous meeting brought me together with a fellow villager who was collecting the café's coffee grounds for his home composting. Shortly afterward another fateful conversation with a friend, a village jewelry artist, revealed her passion for composting in Vermont for years before moving to our village in upstate New York. One thought led to another, and in mid-April 2019 we formed the Ballston Spa Compost Initiative: at our own schedules the three of us pick up food scraps from small restaurants and coffee houses, and two county economic opportunity council food pantries, one of which is a large food/soup kitchen, supplied with food scraps by one of the major food chains in the region. With these we hit a nice balance of 'ramped up' home composting and our daily lives outside of gardening.

During my pilot program with the first restaurant I weighed buckets of different volumes, with different types of food wastes that gave different bucket packings, like coffee grounds with a high water content versus a bucket with a dozen or more large eggplants. On an average the food scrap stream from the pilot restaurant was consistent per its menu, and full 5-gallon buckets weighed an average 20 lbs. Today with a different, more varied and larger food scrap stream we find the value edging toward 21 – 22 lbs. Using the earlier more conservative 4 lb/gallon (by visual assessment, not just number of buckets since all are not always full), since mid-April 2019 the three of us as BSCI have kept over 7 ¼ tons of good compostable food scraps out of the landfill, and make the equivalent compost for our own use.

BSCI pairs restaurants and businesses with local home composters, offering a free community management option when food waste can't be avoided. The individual composters make their own pickup arrangements with their paired food scrap providers, compost in the comfort and timeliness of their own yards and gardens, and get to keep the compost. A most fair arrangement.