

# Composting Providence! An Essential Ingredient in Strengthening our Local Food System

Prepared for The Providence Compost Stakeholder Convening  
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Compost, the product of the transformation of organic matter into a fertilizer to renew agricultural soils has always been of critical importance to the planet.

Humans have used compost to increase their crop yields since the dawn of agriculture. Historically, communities that effectively managed the process of replenishing their soils with compost were able to thrive better than those who watched their soil erode and fertility fade.

As the current economy has faltered, and energy and food costs have risen, it makes increasing sense to raise more food locally as a means for ensuring community food security.

Strengthening the sustainability of our local food system--farms, food gardens, farmers markets--makes good economic sense too. RI's agricultural economy continues to flourish, even in these hard times.

Access to fresh, healthy foods is also a crucial element in public health campaigns to combat epidemics in diet-related diseases such as obesity and diabetes.

Growing more food in and around the city increases our quality of life in other important ways too, by: building bridges between diverse communities, engaging people in environmental stewardship, and transforming inner-city neglected lots into productive, safe, and beautiful places, and preserving open space.

**Compost is an essential ingredient for realizing all of these benefits!**

**Compost is especially key for remediating our city's lead-polluted soils, to make gardens and farms safe and fertile for food production.** Our city's 30 community gardens (550 families), 6 school gardens, market farms, and thousands of home gardens depend on yearly access to abundant, affordable, and reliable compost sources.

**Community Food Security** is a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally appropriate, nutritionally sound diet through an economically and environmentally sustainable food system that promotes community self-reliance and social justice. At a basic level, Community Food Security is about making healthy food accessible to all. It focuses on bringing fresh, local food into low-income communities, thereby reducing hunger, and improving individual health

**Economics:** RI agricultural operations gross over 100 million dollars per year which translates into a return of over \$ 48 million directly back to the Rhode Island economy in farm production expenses, and over 13% of all employment in RI has a direct or indirect connection to agriculture.

Helping to increase compost production in and around Providence is a significant initiative of the Greater Providence Urban Agriculture Task Force (UATF). The UATF is a 35+ member collaboration of growers, anti-hunger and affordable housing advocates, landscape professionals, environmental advocates and educators, chefs, policy makers, and others who are dedicated to strengthening our local food system. Founded in 2004, the UATF is facilitated by Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT). The UATF's Compost Initiative is funded by a three-year grant from the USDA's Community Food Project.

The Environment Council of Rhode Island Education Fund's Greg Gerritt is taking the lead with UATF's compost initiative.

**Our vision is to turn most of the city's food waste into compost so that it is returned to the soil to enable community members to grow more food.**

**Our goal for the Compost Stakeholders' Convening is to translate stakeholders' interest, expertise, and commitment into action steps to realize the vision of a municipal/regional(?) compost system(s).**

Leading up to the Compost Stakeholders Convening, Greg held multiple conversations about compost to raise the idea that composting the city's food wastes for return to the soil was do-able and would benefit the community. He spoke with colleagues who are in:

- the business of collecting, processing, and managing all manner of solid waste, including the RI Resource Recovery Corporation and Waste Management Incorporated;
- the compost business such as Agresource, Newport Biodiesel, and Converted Organics;
- university dining services, restaurants, and other institutions dealing with large, concentrated food waste supplies who are under pressure from their constituents and from the cost of disposal to find new solutions to landfilling;
- government, including the Mayor's office, City Council, RI Department of Environmental Management, and the EPA;

It has been deeply gratifying to hear that so many sectors of the community agreed that composting might just help.

### **Where are we now?**

The City of Providence contracts for the collection of approximately 100,000 tons of residential solid waste each year, with Waste Management Incorporated doing

the hauling to the RIRRC facility in Johnston. About 10,000 tons of this is food waste. As a general rule each resident in generates about 1500 pounds of solid waste each year, with about 10% of that compostable. In addition each person also generates on average compostable yard waste approximately equal to their compostable food waste by weight.

Municipalities in Rhode Island are not responsible for commercial waste, so restaurants, institutions, and large apartment complexes are not included in these totals, meaning Providence produces much more than 10,000 tons of food waste each year.

With the recent roll out of mandatory recycling in Providence there are now two pickups each week at every house in Providence (and many other communities) with the separate collection of trash and recyclables. In Providence there is also the seasonal collection of a third stream, leaves and yard waste. One possibility is to expand that third collection to year round and to include food waste in that collection.

The Urban Agriculture Task Force is working with RISD and Ximedica (a product design firm) on designing a household composting system that would easily and sanitarly allow a family to accumulate its food waste for a week and then put it out for weekly collection. This year Providence will also see a neighborhood bicycle compostable collection program begin in the West End neighborhood with the compostables being composted at one of SCLT's community gardens.

### **Inspiring examples of composting in other cities:**

More than 90 communities around the country are collecting and composting food waste. Every day more communities are waking up to their need to compost rather than bury/landfill their organic materials. San Francisco and other large cities have instituted a mandatory 3 bin system for collection of trash, recyclables, and compostables. More than 1 community is using bicycles with wagons to collect and haul home food wastes to a composting facility.

### **Anticipated issues to address:**

- Collection and separation issues: The shake out inherent in instituting a new system, developing the system, and providing the tools for it
- Funding resources to create the food waste collection systems and compost processing
- What type of compost facility(ies) is(are) most appropriate? (e.g. the windrow system practiced by operations like Earth Care Farm or an in-vessel system such as that used by Converted Organics; some combination; and/or the combination of compost facility, biogas collection system, electric power plant, and greenhouse that Bruce Fulford has developed)
- Would the system(s) be centered at one facility or would multiple facilities scattered through the region provide the most cost-efficient and ecologically sound system?

- Siting a facility(s) (e.g. in a densely populated urban core and/or suburbs, or ...?)
- Is a regional approach, a joining of several communities in the metro area, a better approach to this than a strictly municipal approach? (to help us consider this, we will be joined at the Convening by public officials from several RI communities as well as legislative staff).
- ...other?

The Urban Agriculture Task Force welcomes your insights, expertise, and resources as we go forward. Now is the time to seriously collect data, crunch the numbers, and find a way to work together to produce more compost to benefit our community's economy, health and ecology, and to help build a more resilient future.

Thank you for your willingness to help!

By Greg Gerritt (ECRI) and Katherine Brown, PhD (SCLT), on behalf of the  
Greater Providence Urban Agriculture Task Force)