

# Composting and Waste Recovery

Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition  
Policy Brief



## The Problem:

Unlike the rural areas, cities do not have the advantage of manure from well-managed livestock to build soil fertility. The health and abundance of a crop is determined by the condition and fertility of the soil where it is grown. It is crucial that soil receives nutrients from natural sources, not industrial fertilizers, in order to produce sustainable crops year after year. While cities may not have access to traditional composting ingredients, cities do have an abundance of organic materials not available in rural areas. Wood mulch comes from urban forestry departments and landscaping businesses that grind up fallen branches, dead limbs, or diseased trees. Leaf waste can be gathered from local residents and businesses. Households, hospitals, restaurants, schools, and universities generate large quantities of food waste that can be repurposed into healthy fertile compost. What has been traditionally approached as a solid waste challenge is actually an opportunity for improving topsoil to support urban agriculture. According to a waste audit conducted over 5 days at Cleveland's West Side Market in 2008, an average of 500 pounds of food waste is generated during peak market days (about 2,500 pounds per week). Audits conducted at three other area restaurants revealed an average generation of about 400 pounds of food waste per week. Baldwin-Wallace College generates about 200 pounds of kitchen prep waste each day, which is

*There's a direct connect between the true health of a nation and the health of its soils.*

- Darren Doherty,  
Peramculture  
Designer

composted in an in-vessel system and used for campus landscaping. This full-life-cycle thinking allows the university to save money on purchasing landscaping materials, while eliminating a waste stream of their campus. Other organic wastes available in the city include coffee grounds from cafes and coffee shops and spent grains from micro-brewery operations. Composting initiatives turn an expensive liability into a valuable input for building topsoil and the productive capacity of urban or rural farms that can, in turn, increase the availability of quality produce for local consumption.

## Goals:

The goals of the FPC in terms of composting and waste recovery are twofold: measure and analyze the current state of composting and waste in Cleveland and Cuyahoga county, and begin to institutionalize composting and waste recovery programs throughout the area where needed and applicable. Between all of the education institutions and small and large businesses, the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition has the opportunity to form strong partnerships and collaborate towards innovative composting programs.

## Progress to Date:

To date, the Food Policy Coalition has conducted a food waste audit of the West Side Market with cooperation from the

Cuyahoga County Solid Waste District, the City of Cleveland, Entrepreneurs for Sustainability (E4S) and Ohio State University Extension (OSUE). The audit found that 500-700 pounds of food waste are generated every day that the market is open. With this information, the Food Policy Coalition worked with the City of Cleveland to institute a composting program at the West Side Market. This composting program helped to reclaim over one ton of food waste every week.

### Example:

Food Waste composting can take a variety of forms. Urban growers in Cleveland have recently experimented with “sheet mulching” food waste with other organic wastes, to build gardens on top of asphalt. Not only does this produce a local source of food, but it also helps to absorb stormwater, adding an additional environmental benefit to the project. The garden featured to the right was organized by Neighborhood Family Practice. The raised bed gardens include layers of cardboard, 24 inches of wood mulch, straw, food waste contributed by Dave’s Supermarket, and topsoil. Worms were added to the gardens to break down the food waste and other organic wastes. Six weeks after installation, local individuals volunteered to paint the

garden beds and offer greens to patients and neighbors as a part of a nutrition education program. This one composting innovation allowed for a multitude of collaborative community outreach.

