
MORE DIRT ON THE HAPPY FOREVER COMMUNITY GARDEN

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SIMONA CARINI

In this third article narrating the story of a tiny community garden, we learn what happens to those recycled food scraps.

When I was a child, my family spent a fair amount of time in my father's native village in central Italy. I remember us setting aside food scraps, divided into a pile for the hens (with bread and salad leaves) and one for the pigs (they loved watermelon rinds). At the end of the day, the neighbor who kept hens and the one who raised pigs stopped by our house with a bucket to collect the scraps. It was often my task to deposit each pile into the appropriate bucket. In return for our donations, we received fresh eggs and (in due time) some salsicce or cured pork meat. The news that food scrap recycling would start in Berkeley, where I currently live, brought back to mind those images from my childhood.

THE GARDEN RECEIVES A GIFT

The real beginning of this story, however, and the protagonist of two previous stories for this publication, is the Happy Forever Community Garden, a handkerchief of land that started its life as a traffic diverter at the intersection of Domingo Avenue and Hazel Road in Berkeley and currently enjoys being tended as a vegetable patch by master gardener Rachel, intermittently aided by myself. At the end of last winter's growing season, the soil of the garden was in serious need of amendment. We added some bags of compost, but we knew a lot more was required.

The last Friday of April, a fairy answered our wishes for fertile soil and delivered to our garden a truckload of compost. The fairy's name is Beebo Turman, and she is in charge of the Berkeley Community Gardening Collaborative (BCGC). One of the resources BCGC offers is the free delivery of compost to community, school, and youth training gardens (once a month, by appointment). Ms. Turman explained to me that the dark chocolate-colored compost she had unloaded on our urban plot originated from yard debris Berkeley residents put in their green carts. I had never wondered what happened to the contents of the green yard waste carts that every other week lined my street, until I got this satisfying answer



and a substantial sample of the valuable end result.

Shortly afterward, I learned that Berkeley would soon join 12 other Alameda County cities in the food scrap recycling program, and that made me particularly happy. Like many other recycling enthusiasts, my husband and I have a composting bin in the backyard and have been practicing separate collection of compostable food scraps for years. However, we would like to prevent more

recyclable material from reaching the landfill and food scrap recycling grants our wish.

RECYCLING FOOD SCRAPS MATTERS

According to the EPA's Basic Information about Food Scraps, www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/organics/fd-basic.htm, food leftovers are the single largest component of the waste stream by weight in the United States. We throw away more than 25 percent of the food we prepare, in the form of "uneaten food and food preparation scraps from residences or households, commercial establishments like restaurants, institutional sources like school cafeterias, and industrial sources like factory lunchrooms." As a result, "in 2005, almost 12 percent of the total municipal solid waste (MSW) generated in American households was food scraps and less than 3 percent was recovered. The rest was thrown away and disposed of in landfills or combusted in incinerators." This is particularly bad news, because the decomposition of food and other waste under anaerobic (without oxygen) conditions in landfills produces methane, a greenhouse gas 21 times more potent than carbon dioxide. "Landfills are the largest human-related source of methane in the United States, accounting for 34 percent of all methane emissions." Recycling food scraps diverts organic materials from landfills and incinerators, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions from landfills and from waste combustion.

In 1990, Alameda County voters passed Ballot Measure D, the Alameda County Waste Reduction and Recycling Initiative Charter Amendment, setting requirements for the county to re-

duce landfill use by progressive amounts: We are now working to reach a goal of 75 percent reduction by 2010. According to StopWaste.Org (which is the Alameda County Waste Management Authority and the Alameda County Source Reduction and Recycling Board operating as one public agency), food scraps and food-soiled paper constitute the largest unrecycled portion of the residential waste stream in Alameda County, making up over a third of what we throw away.

As part of its mission, StopWaste.Org has been helping cities implement the food scrap recycling program. Each city receives a one-time-per-household subsidy that is used to cover the cost of implementation, including obtaining and delivering kitchen pails (more on this in just a moment) and distributing educational material. StopWaste.Org also provides ongoing technical, media, and outreach support to increase citizens' participation in the recycling program.

Among the educational material available on the StopWaste.Org website, my favorite item is the flier "The Endless Cycle of Food Scrap Recycling." It shows how the food we buy at the farmers' market or grocery store generates scraps both during the preparation stage and when discards are disposed of. By recycling food scraps together with yard trimmings, we close the food chain and turn it into a loop, since what we discard becomes a resource—compost—instead of a waste. The compost is employed by farmers to amend their soil and make it better able to produce the food that we buy, cook, and eat. When some of this becomes food scraps that are recycled into compost, the cycle begins anew.

FOOD SCRAP RECYCLING IN THE EAST BAY

The first city in Alameda County to implement food scrap recycling was Castro Valley, in 2001. In Oakland the program has been running since early 2005. With the addition of Berkeley in September, over 80 percent of households in single and multi-unit dwellings with up to four units in Alameda County have the food scrap recycling program available to them. Hayward and Piedmont should follow the other 13 cities soon, and then the only non-participating portion of the county will be San Lorenzo and some unincorporated areas. Alameda County's program is the largest in the country.

In July, Berkeley residents received a newsletter announcing the change in garbage collection and in August most of them received



the green pail to be used for food scrap collection (more pails are being distributed to those who were missed).

They also received a bag of compost. What a great idea to offer citizens a tangible token of what happens to the food scraps they will recycle! The city of Berkeley also provided green-waste carts to all eligible households that did not already have them. Food scrap recycling is readily available to one- to four-unit residences. The program is also offered to dwellings of five or more units: the Solid Waste Management Division provides assistance to these larger dwellings so that they too can participate. Berkeley citizens currently deposit approximately 9,000

tons per year of yard trimmings in the green-waste carts. The estimated food scrap and food-soiled paper amount disposed is 5,400 tons. This is the material that we can start turning into a valuable resource.

Contra Costa County is coming in a little later to food scrap recycling with the institution on September 1 of a collection program in Orinda, Moraga, and Lafayette by the Central Contra Costa County Solid Waste Authority. The West Contra Costa County Integrated Waste Management Authority has plans to offer residential food scrap recycling to its member cities once the permitting process for the West Contra Costa Sanitary Landfill is completed.

COMPOSTING EVERY LAST SCRAP

What excites me most about the program is that it allows households to recycle items that cannot be composted at home, like meat (bones included), bread, dairy, and food-soiled paper (such as pizza boxes, paper towels, paper plates, paper napkins and waxed paper containers). When I contacted StopWaste.org, the first question I asked was, "How is it possible that we can recycle items that we cannot compost at home?" The answer is this. The food scraps and food-soiled paper represent a small portion of the total amount of green waste received by the composting facility. There, food scraps and food-soiled paper are ground up and mixed with yard trimmings, so bones, bread, and pizza boxes are diluted, so to speak, into the mass of organic material, which then goes through several steps in a regulated process involving high temperatures. The end result is compost.

Home composters can continue their current efforts and also set aside the additional items compostable under the new pro-

gram. For all households involved in both Alameda and Contra Costa county, it is very important to read the educational material distributed when the program is rolled out, so that we make sure we recycle every possible scrap, keeping it from reaching the landfill, and at the same time we do not discard items that are not allowed. It certainly requires a bit of care on our part to make things work right, but the reward is the knowledge that we are contributing to the job of keeping recyclable material away from the landfill and putting it back into the production cycle. Residents to whom the program is available can join it at any time. It is never too late to start turning waste into a resource.

Back to the start of the story, the Happy Forever Community Garden. The city of Berkeley gets back a portion of the compost produced using its green waste (330 tons last fiscal year) and uses it for its public spaces. The rest of the production is sold by the composting facility to farmers and landscapers. If you are a regular visitor to the Saturday Berkeley Farmers' Market, you can meet Beebo Turman in person, see the compost up close and personal, and take some home. The compost give-away occurs twice a year, in late March and October, and is advertised in the local press. The next date is October 27. My personal recommendation is to go and bring some home. The compost is really too good to pass up, as proven by the crops growing in the Happy Forever Community Garden.

THE GARDEN IN FALL COLORS

Last year a giant pumpkin took residence in the southeast corner of the Happy Forever Community Garden. Shortly before Hallowe'en, the pumpkin was named Pumpilstiltskin by Ryan, the winner of a contest organized by master gardener Rachel that involved the neighborhood children and a three-judge panel. Ryan decided to leave the pumpkin in the garden and decorate it with paint. Afterwards, Pumpilstiltskin smiled at passersby, until the first November rain washed away its happy features.

This year, the job of fall color display is in the hands of the Red Kuri (a.k.a. Uchiki Kuri) squashes. Together with Ruby Queen corn and Scarlet Runner beans, they constitute Rachel's homage to the ancient Native American tradition known as the Three Sisters. Corn plays the role of pole for the bean vines to climb. Beans fix nitrogen on their roots, therefore improving the overall fertility of the plot. By shading the soil, large-leafed and low-growing squash preserves moisture and inhibits weed growth.

The development of the plants (which also include Sungold tomatoes, dwarf sunflowers, purple Brussels sprouts, and Thai basil growing at the periphery of the space allocated to the Three Sisters) creates an aura of magic around the garden. As usual, neighbors and passersby express their delight at seeing the garden's vegetable fireworks. To some who inquire about the fertility of the small patch, I answer with the tale of how we added compost generated from the yard trimmings recycled via the green-waste carts. Now, when we harvest and share what the garden produces, we can recycle all the scraps, and they will become the gift of com-

post that will allow our urban plot to produce more food. And so the endless cycle of food scrap recycling is happening very close to home.

The Happy Forever Community Garden, located on Domingo Avenue at Hazel Road, is always open to receive visitors.

I would like to thank Beebo Turman, and all the people at StopWaste.Org, the Berkeley Solid Waste Management Division, Public Works Department, the Oakland Solid Waste and Recycling Programs, Public Works Agency, the Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority, and the West Contra Costa County Integrated Waste Management Authority, who kindly answered my questions and provided data and information for the article. ♻️

A native of Italy, Simona moved to the Bay Area in 1993 to live with her (now) husband. At the time she was not a cook and not interested in becoming one. Now she enjoys both cooking and writing about food. She works part-time at UCSF as a researcher and helps her husband run the small non-profit he founded in 2006 She recently started her own food-related blog at briciole.typepad.com/blog.



REFERENCES & RESOURCES

Berkeley Community Garden Collaborative
www.ecologycenter.org/bcgc/

Environmental Protection Agency:
Basic Information about Food Scraps
www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/organics/fd-basic.htm

StopWaste.Org:
Food Scrap Recycling. Make it Second Nature.
www.stopwaste.org/home/index.asp?page=528

Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority: Food Scraps Program
www.wastediversion.org/foodscrapsprogram.htm