Photo © Midwest Organics Recycling

From curbside to compost: behind the scenes at a local compost facility

Maybe you've noticed compost bins popping up across Lake County. Or maybe your household is among the thousands already participating in curbside composting. Today we're going to explore the process that begins after that compost (food and yard waste) is collected from the curb.

Here in Lake County, two composting facilities process the majority of our organic (food and yard) waste: Organix Recycling and Midwest Organics Recycling. Both companies have perfected traditional composting techniques to produce high-quality, organic compost on a large scale. How large?

Midwest Organics Recycling compost facility, located in McHenry, IL has 51 acres of fields allowing them to process an impressive 180 million pounds of organics a year. Their facility accepts yard/landscaping waste, animal bedding from local farms, and residential and commercial food waste.

To expedite the composting process, large trunks and branches in the landscape waste are first sent through a grinder. Then smaller portions of animal bedding and food scraps are added; the final compost recipe is about 70% landscape/yard waste, 20% animal bedding, and 10% food waste. That mixture is then laid out in thick, tidy rows, often called windrows, which will be aerated and watered as needed to encourage decomposition.

Fun fact: The rows at Midwest Organics are 16' wide and 8' high to most efficiently accommodate their automated "turning" machines.

Like backyard composting, the proper ratio of nitrogen, carbon, moisture, and oxygen are required to keep the compost rows active and full of healthy microbes. Through regular monitoring, turning, and care the active compost piles at Midwest Organics average 131-181ºF, a temperature range optimal for decomposition and hot enough to destroy pathogens and weed seeds.

Midwest Organics' compost windrows with rising steam. Photo © Midwest Organics Recycling

The final element required for making compost is patience. It takes about 180-250 days for organic waste to cure into usable compost. So it's not quick to make, but the benefit of compost use is indisputable. Through a USDA Grant, SWALCO and the University of Illinois have been conducting field tests for several months now and are already seeing positive results.

More information on the study will be published late next year. Until then, if you're not composting already, today's a great day to start! Contact your municipality to learn how.

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