

Compost company turns food waste into profit

April 11 2011, By Georgina Gustin

Leaves, grass, horse manure. These have been Mike Bacon's primary ingredients, until now.

The scrappy, cigar-smoking 63-year-old has spent the past dozen years turning the trio of components into rich, crumbly compost, the degraded [organic matter](#) that gardeners prize for enriching their soils.

But in the past six months he has added a magic ingredient: food scraps.

"The [food waste](#) is a better enhancement to get a better product," Bacon said this week, standing not far from a house-high pile of steaming horse poop. "We blend it together. We have a recipe."

Bacon has become an evangelist for turning leftovers and scraps into an ingredient for good soil, and last year his Route 66 Organics became the first facility in St. Louis County to get a permit to process food waste. Six months later, several area companies are using his services, including Monsanto Co., Schlafly and Sappington Market.

Route 66, along with another larger company, St. Louis Composting, are at the cusp of a growing effort in the region, one that aims to divert food waste from landfills and turn it into something usable. An estimated 14 percent of municipal trash is food waste - roughly 34 million tons a year - so as landfills become increasingly full, diverting food waste has become a major priority. The city of Clayton became the first area municipality to launch a food waste collection program last fall.

"We expect many more to follow," said Laura Yates, a field services supervisor for the solid waste management program at the St. Louis Department of Public Health. "It's a growing commodity market for the industry. They actually save money because they're not having to pay to dispose as much."

Cities typically contract with private haulers to bring trash to landfills. In recent years, those companies have had to develop recycling capabilities as municipalities and counties required recycling programs. Food waste is the next frontier.

"It's odd to me that we recycle bottles and cans," said Becca Gilberg, president of Viterra Solutions, the marketing and sales arm of Route 66. "Why wouldn't you want to recycle food waste?"

For Route 66 and St. Louis Composting, and other companies to follow, the movement means more raw material will come their way - and that means more compost for an increasingly garden-focused culture.

With food prices climbing, seed and gardening supply companies have reported a surge in sales as people turn to their backyards to grow a little of their own sustenance. Compost makers have seen a similar rise.

"We've seen an uptick in 2009, 2010 and 2011. There are an awful lot of people growing vegetables, whether it's because of food prices or because they just want to do it themselves," said Patrick Geraty, owner of St. Louis Composting. "With fuel prices so high, people are staying at home more, and they want their yards to look nice."

Geraty said his company had been handling food waste for more than a year, turning it into compost at the company's facility in Belleville. Most of their food waste comes from big companies and institutions, such as Washington University, that commit to separating food waste in bins,

which are picked up by refuse haulers.

"A lot of this is coming from corporations like Wal-Mart," Geraty said. "They made the decision they didn't want to see this go to waste."

For commercial composters the trend means more cash flow. (A 40-pound bag of Route 66 compost costs between \$6 and \$10.) But they say they are motivated as much by a desire to preserve resources and help replenish soils.

Bacon's processing facility - where he also makes biodiesel out of vegetable oils, among other side projects - happens to occupy land on the farm where he grew up. Bacon had a long and varied career off the family land but he returned in 1998 and began composting. He said he, like the food he recycles, had come full circle.

"For millennia we've been taking nutrients out of the soil," he said. "This is our chance to put some back in."

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