

After October festivities, Illinoisans smash thousands of pumpkins to divert them from landfills, cut methane

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As people rush to get rid of their jack-o'-lanterns in favor of Thanksgiving decorations, thousands of ornamental pumpkins will likely

end up in landfills.

Lacking oxygen and unable to break down and return to the soil, these discarded gourds decompose and fill the atmosphere with methane—a [greenhouse gas](#) that is more than 25 times as powerful as carbon dioxide in trapping heat.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, about a quarter of landfill material in the United States is [food waste](#), and landfills alone contribute to 15% of all methane emissions in the country.

Some Illinoisans have taken matters quite literally into their own hands. Every weekend after Halloween, hundreds of people flock to an increasing number of locations across the state where they can break pumpkins apart by tossing them into trailers, or as many prefer, smash them with baseball bats, sledgehammers and golf clubs.

After being squashed, the pumpkins are sent to processing centers to be turned into compost in an oxygen-rich environment.

"So you don't produce the nasty greenhouse gases if you're composting because it's actually a completely different chemical process than it breaking down in a landfill," said Jennifer Olson, director of guest and community engagement at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum.

The final product is a rich soil amendment that can be used to improve soil health with its mineral nutrients and beneficial microorganisms.

"There's so many things we can't solve, but this is something we can do something about and have fun," said Kay McKeen, founder and executive director of SCARCE (School and Community Assistance for Recycling and Composting Education).

The Addison-based environmental education nonprofit began organizing and promoting [pumpkin](#) smash events in Illinois in 2014, and they have since reportedly composted over 1,000 tons of pumpkins, reduced greenhouse gas emissions by the equivalent of almost 752 tons of carbon dioxide and diverted more than 217,286 gallons of water from landfills.

On Saturday, pumpkins were smashed at over 90 sites registered with SCARCE across Chicago and its suburbs—as well as others in New York, Michigan and Indiana.

'Pumpkin capital'

Pumpkins have always been a big deal in Illinois.

In 2022, the state harvested 17,600 acres of pumpkins—almost 26% of the total harvested acreage across the country and more than double that of other top pumpkin-producing states such as California and Indiana—according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The village of Morton in central Illinois is known as the "Pumpkin Capital of the World." One plant owned by Libby's and its parent company Nestlé packs 85% of the canned pumpkin worldwide, according to the town. This canned product is mainly used for making [pumpkin pie](#), which was named the Illinois State Pie in 2015 in honor of the Morton industry.

While most of the pumpkins grown in Illinois are harvested for [food processing](#), there are still plenty of households that buy ornamental pumpkins for jack-o'-lanterns or decoration. While the state greatly outperforms others in pumpkin production, it also is a leader in diverting pumpkin waste.

In 2006, McKeen and a former intern at the nonprofit began lobbying

state legislators to pass [state laws](#) to allow curbside collection of food scraps.

"We didn't realize at that time that we should also have a fun way to do [special collections](#) to get people educated about composting. Our law didn't allow for special collections," McKeen said.

Ten years later, the state passed a law allowing one-day special collections of compostable waste.

SCARCE hosted some of the first pumpkin collections in Glen Ellyn, Wheaton and Elmhurst. Its approach of prioritizing fun and learning soon turned the events into a smashing success.

"Whatever we can put back into the soil, that's what nature does, right? Leaves fall down from the trees and they become vitamins for the soil. So we're just doing what nature does," McKeen said. "When you call something 'waste,' people do not understand the value of the water, the nutrients, the microbes. Scraps can be composted and make healthier soil, capture water, reduce flooding—just win, win, win."

Green your Halloween

Outside SCARCE's Addison headquarters on Saturday, McKeen's daughter, Bev Jaszczurowski, also the nonprofit's chief operating officer, directed donors to a blue dumpster.

On the North Side, a consistent trickle of vehicles pulled up to a city parking lot between noon and 4 p.m. for the last official smash event Saturday.

Now on its fourth annual pumpkin smash, the Edgewater Environmental Coalition reports it has so far diverted over 12 tons of pumpkins from

area landfills by encouraging residents to "green their Halloween."

Chris Sauve, deputy commissioner for recycling at the city's Department of Streets and Sanitation, talked to residents interested in learning more about diverting pumpkins from landfills and composting.

The city of Chicago, which began promoting pumpkin smash efforts in 2022, escalated its involvement this year to host 10 events—hot on the heels of the first citywide composting initiative that allows residents to drop off food scraps at 15 collection sites.

"We're looking at this as an opportunity to kind of grow and build momentum around other organic diversion programming that we're trying to get off the ground," Sauve said during an earlier interview with the Tribune.

But city officials are asking people who did not bring their jack-o'-lanterns to pumpkin smash events not to bring them to the city's food scrap collection sites, given that the carts and bins won't be able to hold many gourds.

"We're really asking people to stick (only) with food scrap collections, but we know we're gonna see an uptick in probably some of the pumpkins as well," Sauve said.

To be eligible for composting, pumpkins cannot be contaminated with nonbiodegradable materials such as candle wax, stickers or other decorations. Like food scraps, the pumpkins collected at smash events are transported to a transfer station and then taken to a facility where they will be processed into compost.

McKeen said that at most processing facilities this time of year, most yard material consists of dry leaves but no grass clippings. To make

compost, however, the leaves need to be combined with nitrogen and water, both of which pumpkins provide. They contain up to 90% water which, combined with their high nitrogen content, provide the moisture and heat that microorganisms need to break down the materials into compost.

Those who were unable to smash their ornamental pumpkins over the weekend have other opportunities to dispose of them responsibly. Like the Hooved Animal Humane Society in Woodstock, several farms and ranches across the state accept pumpkin donations throughout November for their pigs and goats to eat and play with; a list of locations can be found at pumpkinsforpigs.org/illinois.

Another alternative for those who want to get rid of their pumpkins but missed the pumpkin smash events is to simply compost them in their own yard.

"Even if you don't have a home composting pile, if you happen to have a yard, you can smash your one pumpkin," Olson said. "And literally just cover it up with leaves in your backyard, and it will decompose into compost. You might accidentally get a pumpkin growing in your yard if you left any seeds in there."

There is, however, the possibility that a smashed pumpkin out in a yard will attract squirrels and rats. But Olson, who uses the pronoun they/them, said it's not much different from having the pumpkins elsewhere in your home, like your porch.

"You already accepted that you're putting a food source for rodents out on your property, so it's not different because you put it under the leaves, in my opinion," they said with a laugh.

SCARCE has helped many communities establish permanent collection

points for vegetable cooking oils—which should not be thrown in the garbage or poured down the drain—to be cleaned and converted into biodiesel by the company Green Grease Environmental. And on the Saturday after Thanksgiving each year, additional temporary drop-off locations are open for liquid cooking oil collection.

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