



The entrance to Earth Care Farm at 89A Country Drive, in the northeast corner of Charlestown. The 30-acre farm is carved out of the woods and has 3 acres of maturing compost. It also has a demonstration garden. | Photo courtesy of Jeanne Wettlaufer.

Composter's mix: not for the squeamish

Earth Care Farm converts leftovers, offal, and other waste into an environmentally valuable commodity.

By **BROOKE CONSTANCE WHITE**
Special to The Press

CHARLESTOWN — As Rhode Island's oldest operating farm composter, Earth Care Farm in Charlestown has been taking great measures to lessen the amount of waste that goes into the state's landfills since 1979.

Producing over 4,000 tons of finished compost every year, the company was started by Michael Merner, who began making compost as a landscaper for use in his clients' gardens and lawns.

It wasn't long before people began noticing how healthy their gardens and lawns were with Merner's compost, so he started selling the surplus compost that he wasn't using for his business. Eventually, he decided to focus solely on making compost and from there, the farm took off and turned into what it is today: the only agricultural composter in the state creating a high quality product made with a diverse group of nutrient-rich organic materials such as fish gurry, seaweed, shellfish, food scraps, manure, and many other things.

Merner, who still owns the farm, retired in June. It's now run by John Barth, 32, the manager, and Sam Fox, 33, assistant farm manager, both from South Kingstown. Barth and Fox have worked at the 30-acre farm, which

is hidden in the woods of Charlestown, for over four years. The farm also has two part-time employees.

The diversity of ingredients in the compost is what sets the farm's product apart from a commercial composter that can only make compost from leaves and grass clippings. Rather than working only with dry elements, which might have pesticide residue and are low in nutrients, as an agricultural composter Earth Care Farm has the freedom to use putrescible ingredients as well as the clippings and leaves that are often delivered to Earth Care Farm from local towns.

The farm's slogan, "working in harmony with nature," fits very well says Fox, who graduated from South Kingstown High School, because the process of composting is already happening all the time and all around us.

"Here at Earth Care Farm, we are simply acting as facilitator to insure that the compost has the best conditions in which to create an excellent product," he said.

As a pile of compost is sitting, it will reach temperatures of 150-160 degrees and release gases which causes microbial activity to thrive and turn the carbon and nitrogen rich materials into compost. The heat kills any diseases and weeds that may be living or growing in any of the organic materials that are composting. Barth and Fox turn the pile about every month to insure that all of the mixture gets enough oxygen and moisture to

sustain the biomicrobial activity.

"We are helping organic matter turn into a living soil to create a stable and mature product," said Barth.

The farm has more than 3 acres of compost that is maturing or has reached maturation.

Moving it around with a tractor takes a while as each pile is over 20 feet high.

"We call it the compost 500 because it often takes hours to turn and move a pile of dense, heavy compost that weighs hundreds, maybe even thousands of pounds in total," Fox said.

It takes about 12-16 months for compost to reach full maturation says Barth, who received a degree from University of Connecticut in history and environmental impact assessment. After that point, it's

ready to be used as the pile's maturation plateaus and doesn't change very much.

Recently, they've partnered with The Compost Plant, a local startup company that collects food scraps from Providence area private schools, restaurants, and bakeries, to provide the greater Providence area with quality compost. The Compost Plant is delivering the scraps they collect to Earth Care Farm while their production facility is being developed.

"The Compost Plant is a group that is diverting tons of food from going to the

"We have a cheaper tipping fee than what is charged at a landfill for similar material so it's often in a business's best interest to compost rather than just to throw away."

— John Barth, manager, Earth Care Farm

Composter

From Page 1

ever growing Johnston landfill," Barth said. "We have a cheaper tipping fee than what is charged at a landfill for similar material so it's often in a business's best interest to compost rather than just to throw away."

They also receive deliveries of manure from the Roger Williams Park Zoo, which adds further diversity to their ingredients because many of the animals are exotic. They are hoping that in the future they will begin receiving more deliveries of biodegradable plates and cups from large events and local dining halls or cafeterias.

"If we compost all our food scraps and compostable waste, even just the much smaller amount we produce in our own homes, the Johnston landfill will not fill up as quickly as they expect," Fox said. "They have a date when they expect it to be full, and we are hoping that every bit that we compost will help put that date off longer."

The Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation, which operates the Central Landfill, now projects that it will last until 2038, but increased recycling could extend its life.

Merner has always sought to operate in a long-term, sustainable manner, rather than relying on government grants and subsidies. Barth said, "We



Manager John Barth, left, and Sam Fox, the assistant manager, both of South Kingstown, have worked at Earth Care Farm for four years. The farm also has two part-time workers. | Photo courtesy of Jeanne Wettlaufer.

don't want to borrow money from future generations even though it's easier in the short term to take a chunk of grant money, but eventually when that money is gone, the farm could go out of business. Mike has always wanted us to be able to stand and support ourselves; if we are hav-

ing financial trouble, we need to change the business to be more economically stable."

Part of what drives Barth to work so hard is that he believes the farm is engaged in a good cause. "We are helping future generations of Rhode Island be able to plant in healthy soil and have healthier

harvests which means more nutritious vegetables," he said. "It's also very encouraging to know that every ton we compost isn't going to fill up the Johnston landfill; we are trying to do our part to help our local environment."

Hundreds of customers, many of them home gardeners and landscapers, have returned to Earth Care every season from all over New England.

Aside from selling compost, they also have pick-your-own strawberries and they grow rhubarb that they sell wholesale to local grocery stores and bakeries. The Merner family has their home on the farm property and they have expansive fruit and vegetable gardens that they use as a demonstration plot.

These lush gardens are some distance from the piles and generate an earthy warm aroma of their own. Thus a visitor to the farm might be pleasantly surprised at its overall ambience, despite the presence of all that composting material.

Earth Care Farm compost is available for purchase in bags at several local garden and outdoor stores such as West-erly Agway, The Umbrella Factory Gardens, and Mill Creek Natural Market among others.

To find out more information on their farm including compost prices, visit www.earthcarefarm.com or call 401-364-9930.