Setting Up a Home Composting Demonstration Site

The Benefits of a Home Composting Demonstration Site
Home composting demonstration sites provide a highly visible and effective outreach tool to promote home composting. With effective signs and/or accompanying brochures, visitors can take self-guided tours and learn which composting systems are best for their personal use.

Demonstration sites typically contain a variety of working compost bins and systems that give prospective and novice composters a “hands-on” opportunity to see, feel and smell the composting process. Demonstration sites may also feature samples of finished composts, plants growing in finished compost, grasscycling and lawn care displays, a children’s compost corner or examples of groundcovers and native plants.

In addition to self-guided tours, home compost demonstration sites can also be used for:
- guided tours, “hands-on” workshops, and classroom visits,
- Master Composter training programs,
- distribution sites for compost bin sales/giveaways, and
- for research and testing bins

Initial Planning for Site Set-Up

1. Staff/Volunteers for Development and Operation
   One of the keys to a successful demonstration site is having committed staff and volunteers. Local agencies, organizations and/or individuals are needed to set up the site, maintain it and staff it during hours when guided tours are available. People that can be helpful in building and operating a site include:
   - Master Gardeners,
   - local gardening or environmental organization members,
   - community park or public works employees, and
   - interested individuals

   Having a municipality or other entity provide oversight can help with program continuity and volunteer management. Without dedicated individuals, a site can fall into disrepair. A poorly-managed demonstration site conveys a bad image for composting.

2. Timeline and Duration
   Spring or fall are the best times to target opening a new demonstrations site. A spring kick-off meshes well with spring gardening fervor, and offers three seasons of operation before winter. A fall opening may attract those attempting to take care of large quantities of leaves.
Demonstration sites will have minimal use during the winter. Nevertheless, a durable site designed to withstand Wisconsin winters will send a message that composting can be done year-round. In addition, a full time site will take minimal work to prepare each spring. Portable demonstration sites with working bins should be reserved for fairs or other special events.

3. **Funding**
   a) *Creating a Budget* – The following items should be considered when preparing a budget for a home composting demonstration site. Costs can be minimized if some of the items are donated or loaned to the site. Where possible, recycled materials (used wood, blocks, etc.) are recommended for inclusion in the demonstration site design and construction. The initial budget may need to be revised after completing a site design.

   One time budget items include:
   - site development e.g. grading, installing water line
   - bin construction supplies and/or purchased bins
   - material(s) for pathway, mulch, edging, fencing
   - tools for construction and maintenance of piles
   - shed for storing tools (if no locked storage is available nearby)
   - groundcovers, trees, shrubs and other plants to make the site attractive
   - planters and other landscaping supplies
   - signs and kiosks
   - benches and/or picnic tables for seating
   - amphitheater seating (if no meeting rooms are available nearby)
   - opening day promotional efforts – many of which may be free

   Ongoing budget items include:
   - supplies for maintenance of piles and demonstration site
   - information brochures and/or tour guide booklets
   - ongoing promotion to encourage continued use by the public
   - contingency funds for vandalism restoration

   b) *Sources of Funding* – A municipality may underwrite the entire cost of the project, funding may be secured from outside sources, or funding may come from a combination of sources. The likelihood of support increases with the level of participation and quality of the plan. Some suggestions:
   - *Local businesses* – Businesses may be willing to provide support in return for visibility. For example, a landscaping business may be willing to donate plants, a wood processor might donate wood mulch, and local retail outlets may provide compost bins. A permanent sign acknowledging donors may be a worthwhile investment.
   - *Local government agencies and organizations* – By working cooperatively with local entities such as a county solid waste department, water
department, nature center, university or school, they may provide increased access to budget dollars or in kind resources.

- **Foundations and other non-profit organizations** – Foundations and non-profits (e.g. Seattle Tilth and Audubon) may provide grants or other types of assistance. Successful fundraising requires a person capable of writing grants or proposals and documenting results.
- **State agencies** – State agencies are another potential source for grant fund.
- **Bin manufacturers** – Bin manufacturers and distributors from the U.S. and Canada may be willing to donate a bin or offer it at a subsidized cost in return for recognition.

4. **Selecting a Home Composting Demonstration Site**

Consider goals of the sponsoring organization(s), and then make a list of qualities essential to meet those goals. Finding an appropriate and accessible location is essential to setting up a demonstration site that will reach a broad audience.

a) **Selection Criteria – Ownership and Location.** Look for sites that offer:

- **Mutual benefit** – Some facilities such as parks, nature centers, schools and community gardens, could use the demonstration site as part of their regular programming. In return, the facility may provide shelter for workshops, bring in more visitors, give some security against vandalism, and help with maintenance;
- **Administrative backing** – A facility owner or superintendent can sometimes provide support staff, security, etc. at little or no cost;
- **Existing public uses** – A site with existing public uses may attract additional pedestrian traffic to the demonstration site; and
- **Permanence** – Seek property that suggests potential for continuing operation.

b) **Selection Criteria – Accessibility.** Survey the site for:

- **General public access** – including proximity to traffic flow and public parking;
- **Disability access** – where standards for parking, walkways and signs established by the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) can be met;
- **Vehicle access** – for bringing yard trimmings to the site. Most sites do not generate enough yard trimmings to keep compost bins active.
- **Access to water and power** (if electricity is needed during construction).

c) **Selection Criteria – Physical Features.** Appraise the site for:

- **Size** – A recommended minimum of 1500 square feet for the “main” community home composting demonstration site. Smaller “satellite” demonstration sites with a few bins could be built at schools, government buildings, or recycling drop-offs;
- **Potential expansion** – as opportunities emerge over time;
• **Topography** – adequate flat space for bins, gardens and pathways;
• **Storage** – a place to store pitch forks, hoses, and other tools;
• **Lighting** – some sun and some shade are desirable; and
• **Adequate drainage** – avoiding areas prone to flooding.

d) **Selecting the Site** – Review and personally inspect a variety of potential sites, talking with those who manage each property. Where desirable characteristics are not apparent, consider alternative strategies to meet needs. Appraise the relative merits of the alternatives and make the selection.

**Getting Down to Specifics**

5. **Complete a Written Agreement**

   Develop a letter of agreement that includes duration, tool storage, insurance, liability, provision or organic materials, open access hours, etc. A written agreement is essential to minimize misunderstandings, especially during staff changes.

6. **Design and Develop the Demonstration Site**

   The site design should take into account existing physical features such as buildings and vegetation as well as proximity to traffic, parking, trails, etc. Make sure the site design allows for adequate pedestrian circulation. It may be helpful to review other demonstration site maps while sketching out plans for a new site. Incorporate the list of items in the preliminary budget. A local citizen or landscape architect may be willing to design a plan, especially if the site has complex design considerations, in exchange for recognition. Draw the site to scale with specific bins, signs, etc. Stake out the site before starting construction and if necessary, make final revisions to the design. Some features to consider in the design are listed below.

   a) **Variety of composting systems** – Provide a representation of commercial and home built systems to illustrate the variety of bins and systems available. Include any bins that are part of a community bin distribution program. Where possible, try to maximize re-used and recycled materials, showing that bins can be made sturdy and free of hazards from these types of materials. Suggestions:
   - bins for slow and moderate composting, e.g., reused wood pallets, recycled plastic bins, circular wire or fence, cinder block, etc.
   - turning systems for quick composting, e.g., multiple bins units, rotating barrels, etc.
   - food scrap composting units, e.g. *Green Cone, City Gardener*
   - trench and pit-composting demonstrations and signs
   - worm composting (vermicomposting)
b) **Other interpretive elements** – Consider the following:

- **Grasscycling** – leaving clippings on the lawn display area;
- **Mulching** – placing yard trimmings around trees, shrubs, and other plants;
- **Reduced lawn size** – expanding native vegetation plantings, groundcovers, etc.;
- **Compost uses** – showing both indoor and outdoor uses if possible;
- **Finished compost** – providing samples from various composting systems;
- **Water conservation (xeriscaping)** – showing ways to reduce water consumption through plant selection, placement and watering techniques; and/or
- **Non-toxic gardening** – promoting use of alternative to toxic pesticides

c) **Signs and other educational materials** – Signs allow visitors to learn without a guided tour. They can provide long-lasting education for an initial investment. Design is critical – appealing signs are fairly short, and yet adequate in their explanation. Keep text on individual signs to one paragraph and few “bullet” points. A kiosk with display signs panels and graphic presentation proves a nice starting place for self-guided tours and brochure holders. Brochures and handouts can be used to provide greater detail about the general site and the composting systems.

Signs are likely to be expensive if they are built to last. They should be made out of durable material to minimize vandalism. Avoid laminated paper or screened signs which can be quickly damaged by sun, moisture or accidents. Talk with local park and nature center staff and discuss their experience when preparing plans for the signage.

d) **Aesthetic appeal** - An aesthetically pleasing, well-planned demonstration site is essential for attracting visitors. Lay out the site to provide a natural traffic flow through the site so visitors see all of the demonstrations. Paths should be at least four feet side with an even grade. Allow a minimum of three feet between bins and six feet of clear space in front of each bin for maintenance. Provide seating and open gathering areas for groups. Include low maintenance plantings that fit in with the surrounding landscape.

e) **Dynamic exhibits** – An active demonstration site may require an additional investment of time and resources, but it will be more attractive and frequently used. If possible, involve local students and others in site management. Consider experiments by school classrooms or other students which investigate:

- relative decomposition rated in the different compost bins;
- how different plants respond to compost applications;
- changes in plant response based upon timing or quantity of compost applications; and/or
• the influence of applying compost in various stages of decomposition, etc.

7. Site Management
Good management is important for sustaining a well-run demonstration site.

a) Management of Human Resources – Time should be budgeted for a volunteer coordinator, community park personnel, or personnel from the host facility to oversee or do maintenance. Consideration should also be given to scheduling volunteers or staff to do educational outreach at the demonstration site on a regular basis. If volunteers are used, it may be prudent to hire a volunteer coordinator. Managing volunteers takes time and effort. Recognize volunteers periodically, and seek to develop a supportive and enjoyable work atmosphere.

b) Regular Site Maintenance is necessary to provide a positive, attractive example of home composting. Ideally, maintenance work should be done each week. Tasks to consider are:
- removing weeds from planting areas and bins
- checking bins and site in general for trash
- keeping bins filled with fresh materials as needed
- turning materials in bins
- irrigating plantings and compost bins as needed
- replacing damaged or missing signs
- checking for other types of vandalism (consider chaining bins to posts if necessary)
- maintaining a worm box
- spreading finished compost around plantings
- checking brochure racks on the site to see which ones need replenishing

8. Promotion
a) Grand Opening – A bit of fanfare is appropriate to express thanks to all who helped bring the demonstration site into existence. Media coverage should be solicited for such an event. Be certain to invite sponsors and supporters, municipal staff from public works and parks, politicians, recycling coordinators and others involved with the site. Consider having a ribbon-cutting ceremony, games or contests (compost-oriented) and refreshments. Another idea is to involve the mayor or a local celebrity in a “first shovel” event to provide some visibility and attract interest to this new – and interesting – addition to the community.

b) On-going promotion – Ideally, the home composting demonstration site will be designed to last for a number of years. If possible make the site dynamic and evolving over time to meet the changing needs of the community. Use
them regularly for holding workshops. Update or remove displays as necessary. Issue periodic press releases and/or feature articles on topics such as the growing number of residents that are home composting, upcoming events, new bins for viewing, etc. If there is a local radio station, it may be possible to get a regular radio feature going.

If the demonstration site is part of a larger framework – nature center, park or something that has regular newsletters or mailings – incorporate articles about the demonstration site and composting in general into their communications. Integrate demonstration site news with any local recycling publicity.

9. Evaluation
It may be helpful to monitor demonstration site use on a regular basis. Is it generating interest in composting? Some ideas to gather helpful feedback include:

- A register where visitors sign in and note comments.
- Comments cards for people to fill out. Place in a covered box, having a separate place for completed cards.
- A local information-gathering survey. If one is being designed as part of another resource-related survey, be sure to incorporate questions about the demonstration site such as how many are aware of its existence and what influence it has had on their own behaviors.
- Keep records on the number of workshops held at the site, number of tours given and number of brochures taken.

The advisory committee can use the evaluation tools and survey information to update the demonstration site and strengthen the overall education program.
References –


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