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Closing the loop, expanding the circle: Educational outreach for institutional food waste on small farms

Nan Bonfils
Full Circle Farm

Suz Welch
Camp Hantesa

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Closing the loop, expanding the circle: Educational outreach for institutional food waste on small farms

Abstract
This project increased the awareness of summer camp visitors about alternatives to using public landfill facilities for disposing of food waste.

Keywords
Human systems, demographics and beginning farmer programs, Integrated crop-livestock systems and diversity

Disciplines
Agricultural Education | Environmental Education

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Closing the loop, expanding the circle: Educational outreach for institutional food waste on small farms

Abstract: This project increased the awareness of summer camp visitors about alternatives to using public landfill facilities for disposing of food waste.

Background

The goal was to expand and improve the educational outreach capacity of an established composting project between two partners, Full Circle Farm and Camp Hantesa.

Objectives were to:
1. Establish recognizable connections for youth between dining hall activity (food waste collection) and farm activity (composting food waste, amending soil, growing food),
2. Promote awareness for youth of alternative (non-landfill) food waste disposal,
3. Provide youth with experience in sustainable agriculture through local food production, and
4. Investigate educational possibilities with regional stakeholders.

Approach and methods

The collaboration with Camp Hantesa began in April 2001 and continued through October, when the last school group from Hantesa visited the Full Circle Farm and filled raised beds with compost from the previous year’s compost pile.

At the core of the project was work with Camp Hantesa, which provided the food waste and the target youth audience. Interaction was primarily with the camp’s adult staff, apprentices, and junior counselors. The principal investigator visited the camp five times a week to monitor the compost project. Bonfils also conducted four “formal” sessions for education on food waste composting. To open the session, campers were asked what they knew about composting and recycling, and what they thought about visiting the farm and landfill and their reactions were mixed.

Campers were then given a brief lesson on microbes, carbon, and nitrogen. They would then guess the weight of food waste they were hauling to the farm that day, and use a scale to check the guesses. Campers then visited the farm where the actual composting was taking place.

Principal Investigator: 
Nan Bonfils
Full Circle Farm
Madrid

Co-investigator: 
Suz Welch
Camp Hantesa
Boone

Budget: 
$1,900 for year one
Question: How can a farm composting system gain additional nutrients? Answer: By reaching out to a neighbor and recycling nutrients that would have been lost to the landfill. Recycling waste should be part of the total food system and can be done with basic farm equipment.

Hantesa campers’ trips to the farm also included a service component that was related to the composting process. Activities included pulling vegetation from the edges of the compost pile, scrubbing buckets, preparing ground for a raised bed, and filling the bed. Every Hantesa visit also included a walk through the CSA (community supported agriculture) vegetable garden with a chance to sample whatever produce was ready.

The most successful learning experiences included a trip to landfill so that students could see where the food waste wasn’t going! The landfill tour validated the apprentices’ work with food waste compost and encouraged them to avoid products that weren’t easily recycled or composted. Two sessions visited the landfill site.
Camp Hantesa visitors comprised only about 10 percent of the groups that came to Full Circle Farm for an educational experience. One of the unexpected outcomes of the project was the tremendous interest expressed in the compost project by nearly everyone who viewed it. Participants at the Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) Community Day/SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) field day frequently mentioned the project in their evaluations as their biggest surprise or discovery. One said, “I loved the compost operation. . . . the sociological heart of the farm.”

**Impact of results**

In six months, this project:

- Diverted more than two tons of waste from the Boone County landfill,
- Created nearly six tons of usable compost,
- Engaged more than 2,300 Hantesa diners in recycling,
- Hosted four large groups from Hantesa at Full Circle Farm, and
- Educated several other groups of school children, as well as 75 attendees at a SARE/PFI Community Day.

For more information contact Nan Bonfils, Full Circle Farm, Madrid, Iowa 50156; (515) 795-3288, e-mail FullCircleFarm@opencominc.com.