

Local South Orange-Maplewood Composters See Growth in the Long Haul

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*Java Bradley of Java's Compost tips food waste into a compost processing facility.
(Credit: Jairo Gonzalez)*

If you attended a local farmers market this season, the recent Green Day event in Maplewood, or any numerous community gatherings, chances are you have met Java and Michelle Bradley. The couple run [Java's Compost](#), which earlier this year launched one of the state's first food waste pickup services, and they have hit the pavement hard to spread the word about it. They cover eight towns, including South Orange and Maplewood.

Every week, Java and his staff drive around in a gray pickup truck to collect banana peels, coffee grinds, leftovers and whatever other organic waste that customers — including this reporter — have placed in their compost buckets, hauling them away to be transformed into rich, fertile compost and redistributed to customers. Recently, they picked up over a ton of material in a single week, keeping that waste out of the incinerator in Newark’s Ironbound district where all Essex County trash is burned and where community activism is on the rise out of concerns for the health effects of having the incinerator in that dense neighborhood.

“That’s like a drop in the bucket for the waste drain, but for each household, once they start composting, they feel great,” Michelle said. Her journey towards composting began five years ago, when she watched the documentary, “Dirt! The Movie,” and a lightbulb went off. It hit her that, as she put it, “There’s no good purpose of throwing away food.”

Every year, the average family of four throws away [\\$1,800 worth of food, amounting to \\$200 billion of waste nationwide](#). Commercial excess is no better: Restaurants and farms routinely toss food, and efforts to donate it or compost it are far outweighed by the amount piling up in our landfills. In 2015, the Environment Protection Agency reported that more food was tossed than any other single material in everyday garbage, comprising [22 percent of the total waste](#).

The pickup service offered by Java’s Compost is a step in addressing that. Yet onerous regulations result in that food being hauled over 100 miles away to be processed in composting facilities outside New Jersey — a gas-guzzling journey that mitigates at least some of the environmental benefits of composting.

The Garden State, it turns out, has a ways to go before composting can truly take off.

Behind the times

While the state is just starting to open the doors to composting, cities such as Seattle and San Francisco have mandated that all residents separate compostable items into a separate bin that is picked up curbside. But you don’t have to go that far to see a growing consciousness around food waste: In New York City, residents can drop off their food scraps at 60 sites where the city will take them for free and compost them. It’s all part of a zero-waste initiative to reduce landfill use by 90 percent over the next decade and potentially save the city millions.

In New Jersey, however, even private services such as Java’s Compost have their hands tied when it comes to recycling food scraps. The Bradleys have tried to find local facilities that will take the waste, but the handful that exist work primarily with large-scale commercial clients. For the residential composting company, there are limited options.

“In the ideal world, we would keep it in New Jersey,” Michelle said. “Our long-term goal would be to have a local composting facility with a local community composting site.”

New York has a lot of these, and the compost gets used in local parks and community gardens.”

Yet here, even the smallest community garden that wants to collect food scraps from neighbors and compost them has to obtain a license from the state Department of Environmental Protection, a process that can take up to two years and cost more than \$50,000 just to get started.

Since that was not a choice for the Bradleys, they decided to get going the fastest way they could – by transporting those materials to states with fewer regulations around the recycling of organics waste. They have since used a few sites in New Jersey off and on, but are still working out the ideal model.

“New Jersey is a highly regulated state,” said Matthew Karmel, an environmental attorney with Riker Danzig in Morristown. He is a member of the recently founded [New Jersey Composting Council](#), an industry trade group that includes Java’s Compost. “We’re a hugely densely populated state, and we have a very robust environmental protection agency.”

Momentum has begun

The good news for composting advocates is that state lawmakers and regulators are taking steps to change the landscape. While regulatory changes to the time-consuming and costly licensing process will take years, Karmel said there is legislative movement that could affect the industry sooner. Over the next year, Karmel is watching to see if the state legislature passes several bills, including one that would require large food-waste generators to recycle their food waste.

That would mean schools, restaurants, grocery stores, hospitals, prisons, casinos – anyone that produces at least 52 tons of food waste annually – would have to compost. That would trigger massive growth of the industry and incentivize the regulators to move quickly to issue more composting licenses.

As nearby regions including New York also increase the level of food waste recycling required, New Jersey composting processing facilities stand to benefit from the created business opportunity – should they be allowed to operate.

Governmental change takes time, but it’s clear that momentum is on the side of composters. At the state’s first [Organic Waste Management Summit](#) earlier this month, an event convened by the Composting Council, the excitement in the air was palpable.

The daylong event featured talks from industry pioneers about the ideal models for expanding composting in New Jersey. But it seems all anyone could talk about over a breakfast that included vegan pastries and coffee served in compostable cups was what the regulators scheduled to speak would say.

The very fact that they were there was indication that the state wants to help the composters. Still, the relationship between the two has been fraught. Scott Brubaker, deputy director of the [DEP's Division of Solid and Hazardous Waste](#), was the first regulator to speak, and he cut the tension in the room with a joke.

“In the interest of food waste conservation, please do not throw any food at the speaker,” Brubaker said at the start of his presentation, prompting the audience to laugh. As the room settled, he added, “We have a lot of work to do. We are all about getting caught up with other states on this because we have fallen behind.”

A decentralized model

Brubaker shared with the group that state regulators are looking at how to build larger-scale exemptions to the licensing requirements and establish size cutoffs that would reduce the regulatory burden for small-scale facilities that can't afford a lengthy review.

“We need to learn how to get out of the way of private industry,” Brubaker said.

The irony is that the very regulations that are making it difficult for composting businesses to take off in New Jersey were put there to protect the environment – to prevent illegal dumping, reduce odors and prevent pests from overtaking neighborhoods. But as numerous backyard composters in South Orange and Maplewood will attest, a well-managed composting system should have none of those issues.

“It all can be mitigated. The word in the industry is that people smell with their eyes,” said Eileen Banyra, founder of the [Community Compost Company](#) in Hudson County. In fact, such issues rarely come into play with small-scale composting operations, she added. “When you start getting into bigger and bigger facilities, it's harder to manage.”

The carbon footprint of composting is smallest when it is done as locally as possible. Banyra said she always asks new customers if they can compost in their backyards rather than sign up for her pick-up service. Java's Compost also offers a service to consult people on how to start backyard composting.

To reduce emissions from trucks driving around to gather food waste, Banyra's company has even tried using bicycles instead of trucks to pick up compost buckets, but the process became too time consuming. As the state considers expanding composting, she said an ideal system would place smaller facilities every 30 miles.

“That would mean less trucking, local processing and then local product – a win-win all the way around,” she said. But recycling food scraps, even when they are hauled hundreds of miles away, is still better than tossing them, she is quick to note.

Small business, big impact

The advantage of being small is something Java and Michelle think about a lot as their business grows.

They fit in well to the buy-local model: As Michelle put it, “Customers appreciate that we’re not massive waste haulers and they know what’s happening to their scraps.”

But growth is also crucial to survival. As they think about what’s next, the Bradleys are mindful not just of the environmental cost of expanding to a larger geographical area – but the sheer time involved in running a larger operation. “The way to survive is to have the densest route possible,” Michelle said. “We are getting calls from towns further west. That’s one of the challenges we are facing: trying to scale up but also not work ourselves to death.”

They are also aware that municipalities may decide to launch their own composting programs, as they have in Seattle and New York City. Michelle said they welcome that. She points to an Austin company called [Compost Pedallers](#) that became the impetus for the city to begin a curbside service that serves nearly 150,000 households. Eventually, the company went out of business, but not before diverting 1.2 million pounds of waste.

“We thought this was a unique idea, and we quickly realized it’s not. There are several hundred of us around the country,” she said. “We’re optimistic we can make an impact in Northern New Jersey and spread however far we can spread.”

This story was produced in collaboration with the New Jersey Sustainability Reporting Hub project. [Read more of Ambreen Ali’s sustainability reporting here.](#)