Dane County Food Scrap Compost Program
Frequently Asked Questions
Updated 11/12/26

Visit (https://landfill.danecounty.gov/compost) to view program webpage resources

1. What is composting?
Composting is the managed, biological decomposition of organic materials (i.e. food scraps and yard waste) by microorganisms in an oxygen-containing (aerobic) environment (EPA). When organic material breaks down in a landfill, without oxygen, it generates methane which is a potent greenhouse gas. By recycling organic resources through composting, significant greenhouse gas emissions can be avoided and valuable landfill space can be conserved for more difficult to dispose of materials. In addition, finished compost is a nutrient-rich soil amendment that can be used to support local agriculture and environmental health.

2. Why is the County in the business of compost?
If there is a higher better use for a material, the landfill should not be the first option for disposal. The Dane County Department of Waste + Renewables (County or W+R) is always looking for ways to divert more waste from the landfill. We can target waste streams that are easy to separate, like large bulky items, or we can target materials for diversion if they make up a large portion of the waste stream. We know that over 30% of the material that goes into the Dane County Landfill is organic material that could be composted and recycled back into soil. Therefore, organic material is a prime target for waste diversion. *Composting is a part of our larger effort to move Dane County towards a circular economy and minimize the amount of trash we are putting into the landfill.*

3. How does the Dane County compost program work?
Through issuance of a public request for proposals in 2024, Dane County Department of Waste + Renewables entered into a partnership with Purple Cow Organics, a local composting company who has operations just a few miles away from the Dane County Landfill for food scrap and organics composting. County staff works with businesses, haulers, municipalities, and residents to coordinate collection services for drop off at Purple Cow's facilities while Purple Cow's staff manage the facility operations and sale of the finished compost.

The County has also invested in equipment and infrastructure upgrades at Purple Cow's facility so that food scraps can be successfully processed. There are a number of successful businesses in the composting market and we believe the County's role is to support growth and stability of the industry rather than competing directly with established private businesses.

In the summer of 2025, Dane County launched residential food scrap drop-off kiosks where residents can bring their food scraps from home to drop the material off for free. The kiosks were designed in partnership with the Madison Children's Museum and installed at various locations around the county including: Madison, Middleton, McFarland, and Verona. Additional locations featuring food scrap collection carts and banners have since been installed in Mount Horeb, Fitchburg, and Stoughton.

In addition to the food and yard waste composting service, the County will continue to offer its Organics Management Grant to support local waste reduction programs. The County will also continue to accept clean brush and logs for chipping at its Rodefeld location.

4. What food scrap materials does the program accept?

To prevent contamination and align as close as possible with what the City of Madison has successfully been accepting with their farmer's market drop-offs, the residential drop-off program is primarily plant-based, accepting:

- ✓ Raw fruit and vegetable scraps (including cobs, rinds, pits, etc)
- ✓ Coffee grounds and loose tea (no filters or bags)
- ✓ Eggshells
- ✓ Uncooked or plain grains, rice, cereals, breads, and pastas

The residential drop-off program does not accept:

- ✗ Meat/ bones, seafood, or animal products
- ✗ Dairy and egg products
- ✗ Cooked foods prepared with fats/oil/ greases
- ✗ Liquids and sauces of any type
- ✗ Pet or human waste
- ✗ Paper and tissues products
- ✗ Produce stickers, twist ties
- ✗ "Compostable/biodegradable" bags or food service materials
- ✗ Inorganic or hazardous materials (i.e. plastic, metal, chemically treated items)

Businesses may email waste.renewables@danecounty.gov for a list of commercially accepted items since additional materials can be accepted with the proper controls and training in place.

Cooked Foods

Most cooked/prepared foods may not be composted with the Scrap Stop program. Oil/butter/etc. can attract unwanted pests to Scrap Stops, so to keep the program running smoothly, please no cooked or prepared foods!

Exceptions: vegetables that have been steamed and have no oils or seasonings on them.

Fermented Foods

Generally, fermented foods (such as canned goods like pickles and kimchi) may not be composted with the Scrap Stop program. These items can attract unwanted pests to Scrap Stops, so to keep the program running smoothly, please no fermented foods!

5. Who can participate in the program?

Everyone!

Food scrap drop-off for residents

Any Dane County residents are able to drop off their food scraps for free at designated locations. Drop-off locations are established in Madison, Middleton, McFarland, Fitchburg, Stoughton, and Verona in partnership with the host municipalities.

While participation is free for residents, the County locks the bins to prevent contamination. Residents interested in participating in the program will receive the lock combination by visiting the program's webpage. Detailed instructions for accessing each site will be available on the Department's website.

The residential drop-off program was initially funded in part by the USDA's Compost and Food Waste Reduction grant program, with the drop-off kiosks and outreach materials designed in partnership with the Madison Children's Museum.

Food scrap pick-up for businesses

The compost program has begun food scrap collections with local restaurants and food service businesses, with additional pick-up service options and training programs for these organizations available. Businesses interested in participating in food scrap collection and/or training services can submit an inquiry form here.

6. Why should Dane County residents participate in a composting program?
Participating in a compost program keeps food waste out of the landfill, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and saving landfill airspace. Residents often ask how they can do their part to reduce their footprint, and this a great way to make a difference. As a bonus, it keeps the material out of your trash, reducing the number of trash liners and trips to your curbside bin.

7. The City of Madison has tried pilot scale residential food scrap pickup before, but had to shut down the program due to contamination and various other reasons, how is the County preventing contamination to ensure the program can continue?
The County has worked closely with the City of Madison and other partners to design a program to address the challenges of the past. The County's residential food scrap program started with collection from designated drop-off site locations. Municipalities across the nation, such as Minneapolis, Chicago, and Brown County, WI (and even Madison's current farmer's market program) have had success maintaining low levels of contamination with this model. While participation is free, we lock the bins at the drop off locations to prevent contamination. Residents who are interested in participating in the program can receive the lock combination by visiting the program's webpage, where they will also receive educational information on how to prevent contamination.

This method ensures access for those making the effort to recycle their food scraps and prevents unintentional trash contamination.

8. But doesn't W+R recover the methane that the landfill produces and turn it into renewable energy? \Won't this impact the amount of gas generated?
While the Dane County Rodefeld landfill does recover and upgrade its landfill gas to renewable natural gas, complete capture of landfill gas cannot be achieved while landfills are still active and not yet capped. Therefore, it is best to avoid potential emissions whenever possible. We have goals to divert as much organic material as possible, but total recovery of this material in our trash isn't economically feasible at this time, so our landfill gas program will continue to successfully operate. Additionally, even if we were able to successfully divert 100% of organic material, there is already a lot of organic material that has been placed in the landfill, and it will continue to produce gas that can be collected and converted into renewable energy for decades.

9. Should residents still use a backyard compost?
Of course! Backyard composting is a great way to educate yourself about waste reduction and the compost process. It also reduces the need to transport your food scraps elsewhere, and provides you with a free soil amendment. The County program is meant to expand affordable access to residents who may not be able to or want to take advantage of a backyard system. If

you enjoy backyard composting but have more food scraps than you can manage, you can always do both.

10. What happens to food scraps when they are finished composting?
Once food scraps and yard waste are composted at Purple Cow Organics, the material is screened to remove large particles and blended with sand to achieve a final product. Finished compost is commonly used as an agricultural fertilizer and is sold in bags or in bulk. You can visit Purple Cow's website here to find their local retail locations.

11. How are you communicating what is accepted?
Ahead of visiting the drop-off sites, residents can find a list of accepted materials on the program webpage.

We have worked with design and education professionals from the Madison Children's Museum to refine our outreach materials so that it is clear what we can and cannot accept as part of the program. Program signage is incorporated on the kiosks and banners educating residents about the compost process and how to participate in the food scrap collection program.

12. How does this program interact with existing composting businesses?
There are a number of successful businesses in the composting market and the County's role is to support growth and stability of the industry. It is the reason W+R made the decision to partner with Purple Cow instead of establishing our own food waste composting facility. There are other haulers and processes that are doing great work and our goal is to support them in any way we can. There is simply not enough existing capacity in the area for food waste composting to achieve the diversion goals the County has for food waste. The County is also able to leverage its partnerships and resources to expand food scrap collection in communities faster than a private entity has been able to do thus far.

Private composters without capacity to process all their materials who are looking to expand collections may contact the County to drop off excess materials at Purple Cow Organics. Similarly, local waste and recycling hauling businesses may reach out to establish food scrap collections for their customers as well.

13. When will we have curbside pickup?
In this period of growth of the residential food scrap collection, there are private businesses who offer subscription type services for residents and a list of these providers can be found on the City of Madison's website: https://www.cityofmadison.com/streets/food-scraps/compost-food-scraps

Curbside collections of waste and recycling is traditionally managed by individual municipalities. The County has historically been the destination for waste and recyclable materials and not a major waste collector or transporter. We are working to support and ensure a reliable place for processing food scraps and will then work with municipalities and waste haulers to accept materials from curbside collection when there is enough funding and interest by the municipalities to do so.

14. Why doesn't the program accept bags, cups or other biodegradable items?
In order to prevent contamination overall, we have started with a limited list of accepted items and that list does not currently include biodegradable cups, silverware, bags or other items of that nature. Compostable food service items commonly take longer to break down than the rest of the surrounding composted materials, resulting in contamination of the end compost product. Due to the time and equipment needed to break down these items, they will not be accepted for processing at Purple Cow Organics at this time.

** The bin liners that the County currently uses in our residential collection carts have been thoroughly tested to ensure that they break down at a similar rate to our accepted materials. These liners are used to ensure cleanliness for users, but large quantities of them could result in contamination of Purple Cow's end product. This is why we ask that users only use paper bag liners for their personal bins, rather than compostable liners.

15. Where can I get a bucket to store my compost?
There are multiple options for where you can obtain a bucket!

City of Madison Compost Program
The City of Madison has partnered with Sustain Dane to collect food scraps at multiple farmer's markets throughout the City. Through this program, 2-gallon food scrap collection buckets can be taken free of charge. For information about the locations and times of these farmers market, click here.

Other Options
You can use any clean containers of your choosing to collect your food scraps!
Popular choices include: Tupperware containers, reused plastic bags, reused cat litter buckets, reused miscellaneous plastic containers.

Additionally, you are welcome to purchase a bucket of your choosing, regardless of size! A staff favorite can be found here.

16. I'm having trouble with a lock. How can I get the cart unlocked?
If you've registered for our resident drop-off program and have the cart combination lock code, but are having trouble opening the gold cart locks, try the following:

- Before pulling the lock out, push the gold lock body into the silver lock loop.
- Check that the numbers are aligned correctly with the line that runs through the digits, you should feel them click into place.
- To relock, scramble the digits first before securing the lock or hold the lock together as you scramble the digits.

17. I forgot the code for the lock. How can I get the code?
For instant access, you can simply re-register for the program here.

For long term access, you can write the code on your bucket! Additionally, some users keep the code in their notes app on their phone, in a journal, or on a note on their refrigerator.

18. Are potted plants or house plants allowed to be composted?
Yes, house plants and potted plants may be composted, however, please remove any potting soil before placing the plant in the compost. In order for Purple Cow Organics to have the correct ratios of nitrogen and carbon in their compost, we need to ensure that we don't include soil in our organic material.

Don't see an answer to your question? Email us at waste.renewables@danecounty.gov !