

Food Scrap Compost Program Frequently Asked Questions

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DANE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF
WASTE & RENEWABLES

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 getting into 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 will 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 will work with businesses, haulers, municipalities, and residents to coordinate collection services for drop off at Purple Cow's facilities while Purple Cow's staff will 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.

By summer 2025, Dane County will be launching residential food scrap drop-off kiosks where residents can bring their food scraps from home for drop the material off for free. We are

currently in the final stages of kiosk design with our partners at the Madison Children's Museum and once complete, the kiosks will be installed at various locations around the county including: Madison, Middleton, McFarland, and Verona. Additional locations will likely be added in the near future.

In addition to the new food and yard waste composting service, the County will continue to offer its [Organics Management Grant](#) to support local community compost and food waste reduction programs. The County will also continue to accept clean [brush and logs](#) for chipping at its Rodefild location.

4. What food scrap materials does the program accept?

To prevent contamination, start deliberately, 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 will be primarily plant-based from the start, accepting:

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

The residential drop-off program will not accept:

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

Businesses may contact the program coordinator for a list of commercially accepted items since additional materials can be accepted with the proper controls and training in place.

5. How are you going to communicate what is accepted?

Ahead of visiting the drop-off sites, residents can find a list of accepted materials on the program webpage. Detailed instructions for accessing each site will be released before the program is launched. Residents can sign up for the program from the [webpage here](#).

We are working 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 will be installed on the kiosks educating residents about the compost

process and how to participate in the food scrap collection program. As the drop-off sites launch, we will hold kick off events so participants can ask questions and learn more about the program from County staff.

6. Why doesn't the program accept certified compostable packaging and foodservice items?

In order to prevent contamination overall, we are starting with a limited list of accepted items and that list does not currently include biodegradable cups, silverware, 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 one exception to this is BPI certified compostable bags that you may see on the food scrap drop-off carts. These have been tested for compatibility with Purple Cow Organics composting system, and break down more readily than other certified compostable products. Food scrap carts will be lined by the County with approved bags to improve the sanitation of the carts and reduce the potential for items to freeze to the carts in the winter. However, due to the common confusion with these items and plastic bags, residents should not bag their food scraps with BPI compostable bags. This is to prevent contamination of the end compost product.

If residents would like to bag their food scraps within their collection buckets, they may use paper bags (i.e., grocery or bakery bags) as long as the paper is not lined with plastic or wax coatings.

7. Who can participate in the program?

Everyone! However, we will start by targeting specific users so that the program can grow deliberately and we can prevent contamination and ensure a quality compost product.

Food scrap drop-offs for residents

By early Summer 2025, residents will be able to drop off their food scraps for free at designated locations. Drop-off locations will be established in Madison, Middleton, McFarland, and Verona in partnership with the host municipalities.

While participation will be free for residents, we plan to lock the bins to prevent contamination and pests. 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 when the program is launched. Residents interested in receiving program updates can [sign up](#) from the program webpage.

The residential drop-off program is 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 pickup for businesses

The compost program has begun food scrap collections with local restaurants and food service businesses, with additional pickup 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 from the program webpage](#) or contact Gobster.Delaney@DaneCounty.Gov.

8. 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.

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](#) to find their local retail locations.

11. The City of Madison has tried pilot scale residential food scrap pickup before, but had to shut down the program due to contamination and other reasons, how are you going to prevent contamination and ensure the program can continue?

The County's residential food scrap program will start with collection from designated drop-off site locations. Municipalities across the nation, such as [Minneapolis](#), [Chicago](#), [Kansas City](#), and even Madison's current farmer's market program have maintained low levels of contamination with this model. While participation is free, we plan to 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](#) and filling out the [registration form](#).

This method will ensure access for those making the effort to recycle their food scraps and prevent unintentional trash contamination. Starting with a handful of drop-off locations will also help program staff fine tune education, signage, and collections to prevent program pitfalls before expansion of the program.

12. 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 Rodefild 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.

13. What are the program's expansion goals?

The new compost program will be capable of annually accepting over 20,000 tons of leaf, brush, and yard waste, and up to 1,200,000 pounds of food waste. We intend to continually expand these amounts as interest in the program grows. We are targeting our outreach towards institutions with large commercial kitchens to substantially increase the impact of the program.

The residential drop-off program is funded in part by the [USDA's](#) Compost and Food Waste Reduction grant program, these funds support the creation of six drop-off sites and the first year of our collection services. We intend to expand residential drop-off locations in partnership with other with local municipalities if there is interest.

The County's limiting factor to expanding commercial pickup services is food scrap transportation. We consider our role to be establishing and maintaining a reliable destination for food and yard waste. Businesses interested in collecting and hauling food scraps for drop off at the County program and municipal representatives interested in expanding food scrap collections in their community can contact Gobster.Delaney@DaneCounty.Gov.

14. How does this program plan to 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's compost program coordinator (Gobster.Delaney@DaneCounty.Gov) 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.

15. When will we have curbside pickup?

In this initial 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](#).

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.