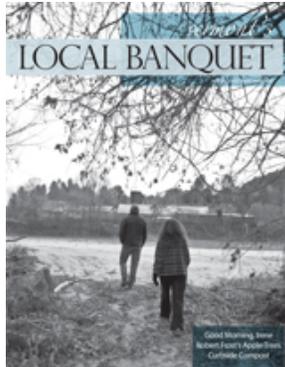


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From the Ground Up

by Megan Kolbay
Owner of Earthgirl Composting



There's no doubt the colorful Earthgirl Composting signs on my black Volvo catch people's attention and pique their interest. Some smile, wave, or give me the peace sign or a thumbs up. Others laugh when they read my "curbside compost pickup" sign. Those are the people who don't understand what I do. I can only imagine what they think!

The most common question I hear from people who don't yet know about Earthgirl Composting is, "What do you do with all of that compost?" I love that question! Not only is it a great conversation starter, it helps me market my business and raise their awareness about the importance of composting. I start by telling them that I don't in fact create the compost; I'm the waste hauler. That means I charge my customers to pick up their food scraps and haul them to a composting facility for processing.

Their payment covers my time and costs, the bulk of which goes toward gas, vehicle maintenance, and marketing. Being a sole proprietor I provide much more than the muscle to haul buckets of food scraps in and out of my vehicle—anywhere from 300 to 400 pounds per week. I'm also the accounting department, the marketing department, and the cleanup crew. Some people don't realize that this is how I financially support myself and my son.

Another question I often hear is, "Why do people pay you to take away their food waste?" The simple answer is that households and businesses that sign up for our services all want their waste diverted from the landfill. They pay me to haul it away because they do not have the time, energy, or motivation to compost it themselves and/or their living/work space is not conducive to setting up a compost bin.

On any given day before my pickups, you'll find me suited up in my green rubber overalls outside—or at the kitchen sink if it's too cold—washing out the

soiled compost buckets with Liquid Sunshine, my favorite cleaning product, made by Vermont Soap Organics. After they're dry, into my car they go in the order they will be needed on that day's route. At a typical household, I'll pick up a full compost bucket waiting outside and replace it with an empty, clean one. Some customers go one or two weeks between pickups, while others find monthly to be enough. Some of the businesses I serve compost not only the food scraps from their employees' lunches, but also brown paper towels from the bathrooms. No business is too big or too small to sign up for our services.

Earthgirl Composting was born out of my blossoming concern for the environment and my need for a flexible work schedule that would allow me to spend time with my son, who was four when I launched the business on Earth Day 2006. The idea came from a friend in Burlington, where I was living at the time, who asked that I take her compost to the Intervale along with my own scraps. She wanted our compost to carpool? And she wanted to pay me for it? I thought that was a great idea.

As I launched my business, I wanted every decision I made to be thoughtful and to reflect my personality. I asked an artist friend to design a logo, which is still at the core of my posters and labels. To keep costs down and to preserve resources, I steadily gathered used peanut butter buckets (and tofu buckets for customers allergic to peanuts) from natural food stores and co-ops to use as containers. I received much-needed, free business counseling from Simeon Geigel at the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO) in Burlington. I purchased a used computer, set up my first e-mail address to help with outreach, and my partner designed my first website.

Since then, I've broadened the list of facilities I deliver waste to, which include Intervale Compost Products (now Green Mountain Compost), Vermont Compost Company in Montpelier, and most recently, Grow Compost in Moretown and Dog River Farm in Berlin. I've also adapted the business to changes in my own life, the biggest of which was moving to Montpelier from Burlington in 2007, which enabled me to expand our service area from just Burlington to include Williston and Montpelier.

I'm excited to be part of this growing movement toward recycling organic wastes. I get e-mails from people all over the U.S. and Canada and have even gotten a few from the United Kingdom, asking me for advice on how to start their own compost pickup business. It's a great feeling to know that I'm not only making a difference here in Vermont but in other places as well.

I believe composting is very important for a variety of reasons. Composting saves landfill space, reduces methane emissions (which are released when food rots in cloistered landfills instead of aerated compost windrows), builds soil, and strengthens our local food systems and agricultural businesses, to name a few. Feeling like I'm contributing to the greater good in my work is important to me, and it's a need that is (partially) satisfied through my work with compost.

The recent wave of "compostable" products presented—and continues to present—a challenge for me. As much as I love composting, I'd rather encourage people to re-use dishes and utensils than continue using (or increasing their use of) disposables just because the product is labeled "compostable." There are also practical considerations. "Compostable" plastics are often corn based, raising the possibility that genetically modified corn was used to manufacture them, and that good agricultural land was wasted on non-food products. The use of gasoline-powered farm equipment for growing "compostable" plastics and the energy consumed during their manufacture is another concern I have. Some "compostable" plastics may contain plasticizers—chemical additives that increase the plasticity of the product—which do not belong in soils. And even if they do not, "compostables" are devoid of nutrients and don't add any benefits to compost. Last but not least, they often break down in the composting process very poorly.

All of these issues caused me to implement a policy of not accepting any "compostable" disposable products, with the exception of brown paper towels and coffee filters. I'm sure I've lost business opportunities from that decision, but I need to be true to my values. I also feel that this decision has allowed me to educate people on the dubious benefits of "compostable" disposables.

Like anything that's labeled "green," there are always down sides to consider and minimize, and I want to run my business with an eye toward "walking the talk." For example, I develop pickup routes that are compact to help minimize

my driving time and associated carbon emissions. I sometimes turn down potential customers because they are too far off my existing routes, and the carbon emissions involved in driving there would be too much to justify.

The question of scale also comes up. Larger haulers are a better fit for food-based businesses because of their bigger vehicles and the smaller carbon footprint that is thereby created per unit of food scraps composted. Composting large volumes can also be more affordable with these haulers because their costs are spread among more people. Yet small non-food based businesses and households in many areas do not have easy access to a large-scale composting option, and I believe the gas I use to serve them is outweighed by other benefits to the climate, to the soil, and to simply making composting a mainstream practice.

For more information about Earthgirl Composting or to sign up for compost pickup services for your home or office, visit earthgirlcomposting.com or call Megan at 802-223-1271.

Megan, her partner, and son live in Montpelier and works toward a life of self-reliance and sustainability.

Photos courtesy of Earthgirl Composting

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