

# Strictly Business

Central Vermont's business monthly

Pre-Sorted Standard  
Paid The Times Argus  
Permit #23

FCRWSS/POSTAL PATRON

Volume 3, Issue 6

www.strictlybusinessvt.com

November 2007

## Saving the earth one bucket at a time

BY PATRICK TIMOTHY MULLIKIN



Photo by Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

Megan Kolbay, owner of Earthgirl Composting, cleans compost collection buckets outside her home in Montpelier.

Here's the dirt on Megan Kolbay. In November 2005 a car-less friend in Burlington asked Kolbay if she would mind bringing her compost bucket to the big compost pile at the Intervale.

Kolbay, who had been taking her own compost to the site regularly and also farmed at the Intervale, was happy to do it. "It's a pain to go down there, especially in the winter. It's a dirt road, and it's smelly, and there are tons of flies," she said.

The friend was willing to pay Kolbay for her services, but Kolbay says she was happy just to do it as a favor. After all, the Yonkers, N.Y., native moved to Burlington in 1999 because she was starting to become more aware of the environment and wanted to live more naturally.

"I felt the people here had more of the same ideas that I did. The big movement in Yonkers is for SUVs," she says with a laugh.

When a second friend offered to pay Kolbay to dump her compost, she accepted – and a light went on in her head. "That gave me the idea this could be a market. It just rolled from there," she says of the unusual niche she now fills.

Today Kolbay, who moved to Montpelier with her partner and 6-year-old son this past March, operates Earthgirl Composting, a curbside compost pickup service with 21 businesses and residential customers in Chittenden and Washington counties. Her clients (who pay \$12.50 per 5-gallon bucket) are a who's who of the state's green and socially responsible cadre: Green Mountain Power Corporation, Seventh Generation, Vermont Natural Resources Council, Vermont Community Loan Fund, Vermont Energy Investment Corporation.

Her residential clients (who pay \$10 weekly, \$15 bi-weekly or \$20 monthly) are individuals who believe in composting but don't have the space, time or ability to do

(Please turn to Page 15)

(Continued from Page 1)

so. Kolbay also handles conferences and events, but not food-based businesses whose waste volume is just too large.

Though Kolbay calls her business a curbside "compost" pickup, that's not entirely accurate. "It's not really compost until it's really made into compost," the 35-year-old entrepreneur explains.

What Kolbay picks up in her 5-gallon "Earthgirl" plastic buckets (recycled peanut butter and tofu containers she gets from area co-ops) is common household organic waste (produce, paper, meat, bones and eggshells) that bypass the landfill to become compost. "It's very rich in nutrients. It's great for the soil; it eliminates the need for fertilizer. It builds up the soil."

She estimates she collects about a ton of waste in the course of a month. A household of two that eats most meals at home will fill one 5-gallon bucket every two weeks, she says.

Kolbay hauls waste from her Chittenden County clients to the Burlington Intervale in her 1990 Volvo station wagon. Waste from her Washington County clients is driven to the Vermont Compost Company in East Montpelier, where she pays a tipping fee of \$5 to dispose of 48-gallons of waste materials — the size of a large trash bag.

Five dollars is a small price to pay, she says, for having this otherwise landfill-bound waste turned into

compost. Kolbay says that while she's thought about packaging her own compost line, her hands are full now with the waste-collection side.

"Making compost isn't just dumping waste, then leaving it and then waiting for it to turn into compost," she explains. "It's got to be turned. It's got to have other stuff added to it. There's a lot of maintenance."

She leaves that side of the composting world to Karl Hammer, owner of Vermont Compost Company, whose company recycles more than 400 tons of waste annually.

"By bringing it to Karl, it supports his business. He then sells it to farmers, local farmers, just like a chain," says Kolbay, who embraces the idea of supporting the local economy to the extent that she believes local waste should also remain local. The only challenge she faces at moment is that Vermont Compost Company, unlike the Intervale, does not accept waste paper. Most paper, she explains, contains dioxins and other chemicals used in manufacturing.

"If you are composting it, those chemicals could be staying in that compost. Then you are putting it back into the ground." So for now, her Montpelier home is the temporary storage site for the waste paper she's collected.

Kolbay says she is not aware of any other business in the state that does what she does, although the city of Burlington did try curbside pickup in the early 2000s in a few



Photo by Jeb Wallace-Brodieur

**Megan Kolbay, owner of Earthgirl Composting, sits with compost collection buckets in the back of the station wagon she uses for curbside compost pickup.**

neighborhoods. That project failed, she says, because the contaminant level (plastic, rubber bands, twist-ties, fruit stickers predominantly) was too high. Kolbay is able to monitor her client's buckets for contaminants, although it's not a big problem; she simply writes the client's name on each bucket.

To date, most of her business has come from word-of-mouth advertising. She does post her brochures

at the Hunger Mountain Co-op in Montpelier and City Market in Burlington. Her Volvo, which sports the Earthgirl Composting logo, elicits waves, thumbs up and peace signs as she drives around, she says.

"People love it. They get really excited about it. Some people laugh."

Kolbay says her immediate goal for Earthgirl Composting, of which she is the sole employee, is "to earn

enough money to pay for the basics — mortgage, utilities. I'm doing OK. I scrape by."

Her ultimate goal, however, is to make changes. "I want to reduce what's going into landfills and educate people to understand why composting is important."

To reach Earthgirl Composting, call 223-1271 or visit [www.earthgirlcomposting.com](http://www.earthgirlcomposting.com)