



Experiential Learning Turns Community Food Waste into Compost Gold

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Introduction

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the US throws away 37 million tons of food waste annually. This waste combines with anaerobic conditions in landfills to create methane, a gas 25 times more harmful than CO₂. Landfills comprise 18% of total methane emissions in the US, contributing to climate change.

Therefore, UF/IFAS Leon County Extension Agents conducted 18 hands-on workshops from 2017-2020 focused on ways the community can easily reduce food waste.



Objectives

The objectives of the workshops were to teach the community environmental benefits of recycling food waste and how to recycle and use food waste as a soil amendment.



Methods

Workshops focused on recycling food waste by either vermicomposting or thermophilic composting and included hands-on experiential learning. Following the workshops, attendees were given digital copies of the presentation and factsheets and were asked to follow-up post-workshop.



During thermophilic composting workshops, participants observed an active compost system, were taught how to use a compost thermometer, and assisted in flipping a compost pile.



At vermicomposting workshops, participants learned about the vermicomposting process and assembled bedding and *Eisenia fetida* worm species into multi-tiered vermicompost systems to take home.

Survey Results

Of 145 participants surveyed, 81%, 83%, and 92% increased their knowledge of the benefits of recycling food waste, materials to create compost systems, and compost system maintenance, respectively.

Follow-up Consultations

Follow-up consultations revealed many positive program impacts, such as:



A workshop participant that worked at a popular local plant nursery took the vermiculture knowledge gained to start raising *Eisenia fetida* at the nursery and sold "Worm Composting Starter Packs" to the public that contained the factsheet created by Leon County Extension.

A workshop participant reported that they started collecting five 5-gallon buckets of food waste weekly from both a local restaurant and a local coffee shop to make compost for their neighborhood community garden.



A workshop participant who is a Leon County librarian brought the vermicompost system constructed at a workshop to the downtown library, where it is used to recycle food waste generated by library staff.

Conclusions

This educational program effectively decreased food waste in Leon County and positively impacted the community by teaching participants the importance of recycling food waste and how to be successful at recycling food waste.

