

BusinessWeekly

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Cayuga Compost - Letting Nature Work

By Sue Henninger

Most people think of compost as a small pile of food scraps in a bin or in a backyard pile. It's a bit more difficult to wrap your mind around giant compost "windrows," rows of compost that are eight to ten feet high and 300 feet long. Luckily for Tompkins County, there's a local family that was able to envision compost on a grander scale than most of us do.

Cayuga Compost was created by Jim and Mary Proctor, a Trumansburg couple who also own P&S Excavating, the family business. "The two businesses really go hand-in-hand because P&S also sells topsoil and mulch," Jim Proctor explains. The Proctors had been working informally with Cayuga Nature Center's (CNC) compost manager Mark Wittig and CNC's seven compost clients for several years when CNC asked them if they'd like to take over the composting program. Wittig and four other employees came to work for the Proctors, and within five years, Cayuga Compost was able to expand its customer base to over 130 clients, including the Ithaca City School District, Wegmans, Cayuga Medical Center, Tompkins-Cortland Community College and Ithaca College. They also service yearly community events like GrassRoots Festival of Music and Dance, Cayuga Nature Center's Maple Festival, the Ithaca Festival and Ithaca Brew Fest, as well as one-time events such as weddings or other large parties. The Proctors explain that compost collection isn't limited only to large clients; they also work with smaller businesses—restaurants, nursing homes, flower and coffee shops, and private residences. Cayuga Compost is especially helpful for businesses that generate materials like meat, dairy, and fish products, bones, fat, grease, and seafood shells; these are harder to process



Jim and Mary Proctor by their compost windrows at Cayuga Compost in Trumansburg.

in smaller compost heaps because they don't create enough heat to decompose or they attract rodents or other unwelcome visitors. This isn't a problem for Cayuga Compost because they have such a large volume of compost that windrow temperatures are often 150-170 degrees Fahrenheit, Jim says.

Part of Cayuga Compost's mission involves education because there are a few materials that they can't use, such as plastics, Styrofoam, glass and metal. Clients who provide material with many contaminants are called and offered a training about what is and isn't appropriate for composting. The Proctors also recommend that employers review composting principles with their employees before starting the program. Unfortunately, if contaminants continue to appear, the relationship is terminated. "We have to be vigilant," Jim explains. Cayuga Compost also offers educational tours to school groups or others who are interested.

The Proctors note that composting, even with tons of material, is a fairly easy process. They give their customers 64-gallon containers,

which are collected on a regular basis, washed, and returned to the business or residence so they can be refilled. Once the compost material arrives at the Agard Road location of Cayuga Compost, it's combined with ground-up "yard waste" from various Tompkins County locations and local landscaping businesses. This mixture is put in the windrows, where it remains for about a year. A bucket loader is used to "turn" the compost every other day. This is a crucial step because the compost is a living entity, and it needs to be constantly aerated. When the compost is sufficiently decomposed, it's put through a screener on a trommel, which is like a giant sieve or colander. This process removes contaminants and large particles, leaving a clean, high-quality compost material that meets all Environmental Protection Agency Class A standards. Cayuga Compost is then ready to be sold to landscapers, homeowners or plant nurseries— whoever can benefit from it. Not only do these groups reap the benefits of composting, but the environment does as well. Natural material that's still viable is kept out of

landfills, and clean compost leads to more productive, healthier gardens (less plant disease and fewer pests). Compost is safe to use around children and pets, allowing gardeners to avoid less environmentally friendly products like fertilizers.

According to the Proctors, composting is a cost-effective process because it saves businesses the cost of garbage tags. Additionally, Tompkins County Solid Waste runs a program called ReBusiness Partnership Program (www.recycle.tompkins.org), in which Tompkins County businesses can have an assessment made of their current waste and recycling practices. Businesses who participate in this program may then qualify to have the cost of Cayuga Compost's pickup partially subsidized.

What does the future hold for Cayuga Compost? Last year alone the company processed 3,394 tons of compost from 16, 172 tons of organic waste and 7,000 tons of food waste. The company is permitted by the Department of Environmental Conservation and has currently just about reached the capacity for how much compost they're allowed to process. "We need to figure out if we want to keep growing or to stay where we're at," Mary says. She attributes much of their steady growth to the social culture of sustainability that was emerging just as they took on composting. "The timing was good; everyone wants to be green these days," she explains. The Proctors didn't compost until they founded Cayuga Compost, but now they proudly note that their family of six has reduced their garbage output to only one bag a month. According to Mary, "My background is in bookkeeping, but now I'm known as the Compost Queen!" Learn more about Cayuga Compost at www.cayugacompost.com

Photo by Sue Henninger

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