

Upper Brookville composting program takes root

By Joseph Ostapiuk/joseph.ostapiuk@newsday.com

When Kathryn Cervino moved from Queens to Upper Brookville over a year ago, she called around in search of the nearest food scraps drop-off site.

There was none, she learned, near her North Shore village in Nassau County. Cervino, who is president of the Coastal Preservation Network, an environmental nonprofit, had been turning her food scraps into fertilizer in New York City for years. But on Long Island, there was no municipal system or smaller network that supported a food scraps composting program.

So she launched one herself.

"There's so much waste from food scraps that we could be utilizing," Cervino said in a phone interview. "It's just ridiculous to throw them in the trash."

Composting is a process whereby organic materials such as banana peels, watermelon rinds and coffee grounds are broken down into a nutrient-rich soil. Through the process, microorganisms, such as bacteria and fungi, along with adequate oxygen flow and other environmental factors, aid in the decomposition. A final product, compost, enriches the soil and helps plants grow.

Cervino recently launched a composting pilot in Upper Brookville, joining a broader effort to eliminate food waste on Long Island.

Upper Brookville set aside space for Cervino on village property to host a food drop-off site. So far, the program has collected more than 300 pounds of food waste over five weeks from about 20 participants. Over time, the compost pile will be turned over across three wooden bins until it's ready to serve as a soil additive. Cervino said she hopes to inspire more composting programs.

Grassroots push

At Upper Brookville's Village Hall property on Wolver Hollow Road, a group of about a dozen people gathered Thursday to learn more about composting. Cervino showed how to balance food scraps with earthy materials such as leaves and wood chips. That helps the composting process by absorbing moisture and allowing oxygen to accelerate decomposition.

With a bucket of food scraps in hand, Mauree Akhi, of Mill Neck, added to the growing compost pile. A graduate of Stony Brook University with a background in sustainability, she said community-run programs can help make composting more common.

"The grassroots is where a lot of shifts happen," Akhi said.

Laura Russo, a longtime Sea Cliff resident, launched a similar program in her North Shore village. About a dozen families participate.

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She either picks up bins of food waste the families have dropped off at her home or gathers them from Campground Craft Beer Market, which volunteered as a drop-off point. Then she brings them to a facility in Muttontown that has a three-bin system, similar to the one in Upper Brookville, where piles of compost are moved from one bin to the next. Moving the pile helps aerate the material and speeds up decomposition.

Currently, Russo said village residents are unable to drop off food scraps at Sea Cliff's Department of Public Works yard.

"I would like the village to buy-in," Russo said. "There's a lot of people who compost at home, but for a lot of people that's just not a good fit ... and they really want an option to do something actionable to help the environment."

Sea Cliff Mayor Elena Villafane said the village is "an environmentally conscious community." She said that while she supported composting, she pointed to logistical considerations. She said she'd like to see the pilot expand and gauge if there's more interest.

Diverting waste

Jonathan M. Lehrer, chairman of Farmingdale State College's department of urban horticulture and design, said composting mirrors natural processes. The organic material typically thrown out in the trash "has value," with "stored organic energy that can be redirected back into the soil," he said.

When that material is thrown into a landfill, "it's basically a waste," Lehrer said.

Composting is mandatory in New York City, which also runs a curbside program for all residents. On Long Island, composting is a piecemeal operation. The state recently awarded a grant to the Village of Port Washington North to kickstart its own program, Newsday reported. On the East End of Long Island, the towns of Riverhead and Southold started their own composting programs in 2022 and 2024, respectively.

In most of Nassau County, composting is run by a patchwork of community groups.

Claire Brezel, a board member with Residents Forward, the nonprofit helping to launch the Port Washington North program, said she hopes more municipalities are convinced to run programs.

"The important thing is that we're diverting food waste from the garbage stream, and it's going back into the ground instead of up in the incinerator smoke," Brezel said.

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