

Austin-based coffee recycling program keeps community well grounded

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October 22, 2013

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AgriLife Extension, Compost Coalition brew up 'earthy' community initiative

[Ground to Ground Video](#)

AUSTIN – More than eight tons a month. That's how much organic material in the form of spent coffee grounds the Austin-based Ground to Ground program diverts from area landfills and makes available to people in the community as compost.

Since its inception last year, the not-for-profit, volunteer-based program established by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service of Travis County and Compost Coalition, has been recruiting businesses to provide free used coffee grounds to Austin residents.

"Composting is an important but underutilized part of gardening, and coffee grounds make particularly good compost for plants in the South Central Texas area due to their slight acidity and high nutritional value," said Daphne Richards, AgriLife Extension agent for horticulture, Travis County.

Richards said coffee grounds help facilitate the composting of other organic materials and provide a variety of key nutrients, including nitrogen, potassium and phosphorous.

"They also provide plants with micronutrients, such as calcium and copper, which are needed in smaller quantities," she noted.

Currently, more than 20 locations – coffee houses, restaurants, convenience stores and other businesses – participate in the program, providing their customers with 4-gallon repurposed food containers filled with spent coffee grounds for them to use as compost for their plants, gardens and landscapes.

"We got the idea for Ground to Ground after visiting with the Compost Coalition, which we saw as an excellent resource for information on composting for area gardeners, especially the more than 200 volunteers in our agency's Travis County Master Gardeners program," Richards said.

Lindsay Razzaz, AgriLife Extension horticultural assistant in Travis County, who also attended the meeting, said when she and Richards returned to the office they agreed on the idea of developing a composting program centered around coffee grounds.

"I began researching existing community-driven composting models, and found one in Melbourne, Australia, called Ground to Ground," Razzaz said. "It seemed like a great fit – coffee grounds are an incredible, easy to use soil amendment and the program would require minimal inputs to sustain. It was simply a matter of re-aligning existing resources, and doing educational outreach, which is what AgriLife Extension is all about. We asked that program's founder if we could extend the Ground to Ground banner, and he said yes."

While most of the coffee shops and other businesses in the Ground to Ground program are small independents, several locations of the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf chain as well as locations of large convenience store chains also participate.

AgriLife Extension personnel, Compost Coalition members and Travis County Master Gardener volunteers bring

participating locations the 4-gallon plastic containers stamped with the program logo for them to fill with used coffee grounds.

Will Stewart, a co-owner of the East Village Café, said he decided to participate in the program as a way to provide an added service to people in his neighborhood.

“We have a lot of what I would call ‘urban farmers’ around here, as well as people who come in on a regular basis and get free coffee grounds for their patio plants and home landscapes,” Stewart said. “It’s a great feeling to know that we’re providing our customers with something that literally goes back into the community.”

Stewart noted that he also uses coffee grounds to feed the plants in front of his own shop.

“I regularly put coffee grounds into the large concrete planter out front filled with zinnias and kale,” he said. “The coffee grounds really help them grow.”

There’s also a strictly practical economic reason for participating in the program, said Mallory Alison, owner of Vintage Heart Coffee, another Ground to Ground participant.

“I had contacted some waste management services around town and they all wanted to charge me for picking up and disposing of my used coffee grounds,” Alison said. “I’d already paid for the coffee once, so I didn’t see the reason for paying for it again. When I found out about the Ground to Ground program, I saw it as a win-win situation.”

Razzaz said a recent poll she took of participating coffee shop managers revealed that the program is currently responsible for keeping more than 4,002 gallons – or more than 16,000 pounds of grounds – out of area landfills each month.

“Several community gardens in Austin also regularly pick up the free coffee grounds provided through our program. It’s neat to see Ground to Ground sparking partnership between private businesses and local gardening groups,” Razzaz said.

Heather-Nicole Hoffman, a founding member of the Compost Coalition, said the Ground to Ground program helps meet the goals of the Zero Waste Plan adopted by the city of Austin.

“The city of Austin is trying to eliminate waste citywide by the year 2040, and we see our program having a positive impact toward reaching that goal,” Hoffman said. “We’re already diverting more than eight tons of waste in the form of coffee grounds from area landfills each month. Imagine how much more that will be as others become Ground to Ground participants.”

As a grassroots volunteer organization, she said, the coalition helps connect those with resources with those who can use them to divert organic materials from landfills into nutrient-rich earth.

“We don’t have to fill up our landfills with kitchen scraps, leaves, paper, coffee grounds, grass clippings, spoiled food or other organic materials,” she said. “We can all work together to turn trash into treasure by putting organic materials to use in practical and beneficial ways, like compost, to increase plant productivity and soil’s water retention.”

The City of Austin applauds diversion of organic materials from the waste stream via composting, said Woody Raine, a mechanical engineer specializing in waste reduction and conservation with the City of Austin.



Used coffee grounds are placed in plastic 4-gallon containers residents can pick up free of charge and use as compost in their gardens and landscapes. (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service photo)



Coffee grounds from the Ground to Ground program are also used in community gardens in the Austin area. (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service photo)

“Composting is a large component of reaching the City’s Zero Waste goal and will soon be required for all Austin food services under Phase II of the Universal Recycling Ordinance,” he said. “Austin Resource Recovery encourages composting of coffee grounds due to their rich nitrogen content.”

Denise Harrelson, a member of the Travis County Master Gardeners association and community “captain” for the Ground to Ground program, said one of the best aspects of the program is that almost any location where coffee is brewed can potentially become a grounds donor.

“Coffee shops and restaurants are the logical starting point for the program, but other establishments—such as colleges, churches, community centers, office buildings, or convenience stores—can repurpose their used coffee grounds whether they brew daily or just once a week,” Harrelson said. “Besides the compost pile, the grounds can be put to use in house plants, vegetable gardens, flower beds, and tree beds. Coffee grounds don’t discriminate... they love to feed any soil – and a healthier soil helps our plants and trees better survive the harsh environmental conditions we sometimes face in Central Texas.”

Program coordinators hope to expand the program beyond Austin, making it a statewide and possibly a national initiative.

“We’re proud of this program and hope others throughout Austin, the state of Texas and beyond will join us in this or similar efforts,” Richards said. “This kind of program is easy to maintain and can have broad appeal because coffee is served almost everywhere — and coffee grounds are a highly useful and practical composting material.”

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