



Organic farm in Lebanon turns Walmart waste into compost

By Laura Baverman • lbaverman@enquirer.com • June 23, 2010

Marvin Duren started composting 35 years ago because it was good for the environment.

Today, he's helping Walmart do the same.

The owner of Marvin's Organic Gardens in Lebanon won a contract from the world's largest retailer to compost food waste from as many as 160 of its stores in Ohio. It's a major feat for the organic farmer, who founded the 75-acre operation in 1999 with a plan to dedicate one third of his land to composting.

Duren opened his organic farm the same day he sold his franchise of 24 local Waffle Houses. It'd been a dream since he completed a degree in agriculture from the University of Georgia in the 1970s. Organic farms have four major benefits, according to Duren: food safety, cost, results and simplicity.

He'd composted yard and animal waste in his backyard in Lebanon for years. And at one time, he collected egg shells, coffee grounds and lettuce waste from his Waffle Houses. He was forced to stop that when he learned of the permitting process required for commercial composting.

"I fed my yard with composted material and things started growing like wildfire," he said. "It fixes lawns that are yellow and scant and it makes great material to build new flower beds."

Duren always wanted to expand the pile. He started by seeking certification from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency to collect yard and animal waste from local companies and residents. His largest source was the Lebanon Racetrack, which discards up to 300 yards of animal waste a week. Up until last fall, his pile stretched about 10 acres and included about 1 million yards of material.

The attention by large corporations to the sustainability movement prompted Duren to seek certification to collect food waste in 2009. He won a \$250,000 state grant to purchase the equipment necessary to build up his operation. He matched the grant with \$250,000 of his own investment.

That let him buy a 50-foot grinder and screener to help reduce the size of incoming materials into finer grains. A hauler would be used to turn the pile several times a year so older and newer materials could be mixed together.

Rain water is captured and filtered through the pile to keep microorganisms like bacteria, fungus, protozoa and nematodes alive and breaking down the materials.

"The older the compost, the better it is," Duren said. He only sells product that is dark and rich, like soil, and with no odors or pathogens. A yard of composted material can be purchased for \$34.95.

Folgers was Duren's first major source of waste. The coffee company tests its product at a plant near Cincinnati. It generates about four tons of unused coffee beans and grounds on a bi-weekly basis, and hauls it to Marvin's for composting. It was a relationship initiated by Holly Christmann, program manager of Hamilton County's Solid Waste Management District.

"Over the past two years, we've been talking to more and more companies about diverting food waste," she said. Marvin's and another Warren County farm called Brausch Farms earned the certification last year. Until then, Southwest Ohio lacked the infrastructure to accommodate commercial food waste composting, Christmann said. Today, hospitals, universities and manufacturers are working to establish composting programs.

Their largest barrier is transporting the material, which can be very heavy in weight. Few local haulers will transport food waste, Christmann said.

Walmart works with a company called Future Organics Inc. to collect expired fruits, vegetables, eggs, milk, bread and juices from its stores in Ohio. Its first load of 12 tons arrived to Marvin's June 14. Duren expects that amount to grow weekly as waste from more stores is collected.

Walmart doesn't comment on its vendor relationships, but the retailer has been vocal over the past several years about its goal to create zero waste.

"The aluminum, plastic, paper, food in the waste stream - there is a lot of value there. They can be recycled or we can work with a supplier to turn that old material into a new product," said Kory Lundberg, a sustainability spokesman for Walmart.

Ohio EPA is very interested in seeing food waste composting grow in the state. About 10 percent of material that enters landfills could be composted, said Andrew Booker, an EPA supervisor who specializes in recycling and waste management.

"We're on the front end, but there is rapid evolution on all three levels, waste generation, facilities that can handle it and transportation," he said.