

Food waste in landfills produces twice as much greenhouse gas as commercial aviation in the United States.<sup>2</sup>



In 2019, uneaten food in Illinois landfills released the equivalent of 10.5 million tons of CO2 into the atmosphere.



# Building a Culture of Composting in Greater Chicagoland

## Background

Food waste is a pressing environmental concern in Illinois. In Cook County — and in many counties around the state — it accounts for up to 37% of landfilled material.<sup>1</sup> But food waste is not just filling up municipal dump sites. It is a major source of methane, a greenhouse gas that is considerably more harmful to the climate than carbon dioxide (CO2).

Composting could do for reducing food waste what recycling has done in the last 50 years for reducing plastic, paper, and aluminum waste. But the 8 million residents in greater Chicagoland need more education about composting, and the process needs to be easier and more accessible. Furthermore, opportunities to compost are unevenly distributed throughout the regionsome communities have robust curbside collection programs, while others do not. A team of University of Illinois Extension educators has partnered with the Illinois Sustainable Technology Center and other composting profes-



Greater Chicagoland has 8 million residents living in Cook, Kane, Will, DuPage, Lake, and McHenry Counties.

sionals located in northern Illinois to develop opportunities for residents and food-based businesses to learn about and begin composting regularly.

## How are we building a culture of composting?

Our team, led by University of Illinois Extension, aims to increase both demand for and the rate of composting adoption to collectively reach a "tipping point" where composting is as common as recycling.

#### To build this culture, we are

- · Delivering composting education
- Convening compost professionals to co-create solutions and action steps to improve our composting ecosystem
- Supporting small food businesses with food waste reduction and composting
- Providing residents opportunities to take action via Pumpkin Smash and other food scrap collection events

<sup>1</sup>https://illinoisrecycles.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2015-Waste-Characterization-Update-FINAL.pdf <sup>2</sup>https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2022-04/us-ghg-inventory-2022-main-text.pdf



Illinois Extension

College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences University of Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Local Extension Councils Cooperating. University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.



Together, we can create a healthy environment, promote local circular economies, and support our urban farms and gardens.



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## What we've done so far

#### Since November 2020 we've

- Held 18 waste diversion & education events throughout Cook County
- Engaged over 2,600 residents at in-person events
- Diverted 46 tons of compostable waste, preventing the equivalent of 22 tons of CO2 release or removing 5 passenger vehicles from the road annually
- Worked with more than 10 community partners, 6 schools, and 23 organizations
- Engaged the next generation of composters by holding events at schools and with youth
- Trained 34 Compost Ambassadors
- Published webpages and educational fact sheets in English and Spanish

## **Our Partnerships**

We've partnered with community organizations, municipalities, and schools to reach wider audiences and ensure our materials are resonating with and empowering people to take the next steps on their compost journey. We prioritize partnerships in communities more affected by environmental issues and lack of resources.

## **The Future**

We envision a future in which everyone views compost as a valuable resource, separates their compostable waste, and has access to a composting service. In this future, greenhouse gas emissions have decreased, global warming has slowed, urban farmers are using high-quality, locally produced compost to grow healthy food for our residents, and compost is utilized as an effective material in public works projects such as parks and roads. We are working to meet the EPA's goal of cutting food waste in half by 2030.

#### Our efforts aim to

- Inspire residents to begin separating and composting their organic waste
- · Generate more local compost for urban farms and gardens
- Spur new economic opportunities
- Reduce methane gas emissions from landfills

## **Get Involved**

#### Visit go.illinois.edu/i-compost to

- Learn more by becoming a Compost Ambassador (Summer/Fall 2023)
- Find out how to host or attend a pumpkin smash event near you after Halloween
- Sponsor a food scrap pick-up service for residents or small food businesses in communities more adversely affected by environmental issues
- Read recommendations for building a culture of composting in your community (Fall 2023)

