**NCR-OTF Meeting, September 24, 2012**

**“Developing a Master Composter Training**

**Program in the DC Region:  Lessons from Models”**

**Presenter 1: John Zarola, President of the Bernalillo County, New Mexico Master Composter Association**

* After a twenty year hiatus, the Bernalillo County (Bernco) Master Composter program (MC) re-emerged in late 2009 when John began discussion with Bernco Cooperative Extension agents.
* Partnered with other various like-minded entities such as the New Mexico Recycling Coalition.
* The Bernalillo County Cooperative Extension agreed to be the umbrella organization.
* A core group of individuals emerged as the primary program facilitators.
* Program Description: A “train the trainer” program. The current program overseen by the Bernalillo County Extension Master Composters (BCEMC) board of directors; Instructors are volunteer graduates of the program except for the very first instructor who arranged compensation with the Extension Service; 30 hours of training required; next training is March 2013 (4th training to date); 10 additional hours of community service are required.
* Bernalillo County Extension Master Composters (BCEMC) association: The first graduating class decided to establish this association as a means of continuing the program. The BCEMC association is responsible for maintaining membership, conducting outreach, recruiting/providing trainers, etc. The association created its own bylaws, mission, vision, etc. The Bernalillo County Cooperative Extension Service hosts the BCEMC website free of charge.
* Budget: There is an $80 fee to participate in the Master Composter training. The course fee goes to the BCEMC association for the continuation of educational efforts.
* Program enrollment rates: 2010 = 29, 2011 = 25, 2012 = 15. However, an approximate 30% of participants end up being continued volunteers.
* Targeted Participants: They network the program to the general public, specifically to gardening groups, contiguous county extension services and Indian reservations. Master gardeners have been particularly interested and their webmaster keeps a list of those who have expressed an interest in the training.
* To address rodent/vector issues, they teach composters to avoid meats, fish, and dairy; use hardware cloth; they inevitably come along, but John offered a positive take saying that the creatures help with the churning/decomposition process.
* As far as barriers, John mentioned that he first sets up trainings/sites and then has to find someone to teach the course so that process can be of concern sometimes.

**Presenter 2: Jodie Colon, Compost Educator and Project Manager, NYC Compost Project in the Bronx**

* The NYC Master Composter Course is offered in all 5 boroughs and is part of the NYC Composting Project, which began in 1993, currently run by the NYC Department of Sanitation’s Bureau of Waste Prevention, Reduction and Recycling. The Master Composter course began in 1998 (Staten Island pilot) to propel the city’s leaf and yard waste collection at the time.
* Each borough has 2-3 staff members responsible for implementing the NYC Compost Project and MC training. All 5 boroughs use the citywide model for their Master Composter training, but get to customize the program a bit based on its own needs/assets. There is 1 main instruction/demonstration site in each of the 5 boroughs, and then many more including school gardens, churches, non-profits, coops, CSA’s etc. In the Bronx, Jodie hosts 200-300 demonstrations/activities per year. There is a 2 tiered “recognition process” by which sites are recognized as first “a compost site” and then can become a “demonstration site.”
* The MC training program is geared to be a “train the trainer” mentor program that develops composting educators and community leaders. The program only accepts 80 potential Master Composter (MC’s) citywide (approximately 15 coming from the Bronx last year out of 100 applicants) – this is to ensure one on one mentorship. The program wants to create “enthusiastic and knowledgeable volunteers who are comfortable and confidant.” As such the program has an interview/screening process and is quite competitive. NYC believes “compost builds community.” Therefore, program managers ask potential participants “why are you doing this program, what will you do with it, and with whom are you affiliated.” The program targets passionate, interested and sometimes “crazy/outside of the box” thinkers. According to Jodie, “it is easy to calm people down but harder to fire them up.” Another suggestion is to recruit early, to seek the kind of folks that can advance this program.
* The program maximizes its impact by building social networks and using outdoors spaces in the city such as the urban garden sites that were reclaimed/redeveloped after trauma in the 1960’s-70’s. NYC surveyed all its abandoned lots for potential involvement as this program developed.
* The training program is essentially broken down in 3 parts:
1. Classroom – 24 hours (8 x 3 hour sessions) – Jodie suggests that lessons must keep the content relatively basic, so that participants can “digest,” pass it forward, and avoid getting lost or disinterested in the too technical/scientific.
2. Field Trips – 2 Saturdays; participants don’t just watch but rather work! Truly a hands-on learning experience to advance various needs of the project site.
3. Community Service – 30 hours required; participants are “MC to be” until they complete all 30 hours within one year of taking the training. A 15 hour project out in the field is an option. MC’s do this work both at designated demonstration sites as well as in public spaces to benefit the city. The final project proposal must address “who, what, where, why, how:” the project must be relevant to composting and time defined (6 month deadline; this helps the program carry on successfully as according to Jodie, “the difference between a dream and a goal is a deadline.)
* 60-90% of participants complete all course requirements/service hours to become Master Composters. Jodie’s program in the Bronx has a 90% graduation rate.
* The NYC Master Composter Manual is currently being updated – The revised manual will reflect the following current course content:
1. Introduction
2. Compost Basics
3. Compost Systems
4. Soil Science
5. Other Ways to Recycle Organics
6. How to Conduct Outreach
* Course fee = A non-refundable $40, however scholarships are available (i.e. course fee refunded upon completion of community service hours).
* NYC uses a 3 bin cedar wood system at most of its sites – material cost = $300. The bin controls vector issues by using hardware cloth on the bottom, and nearby signage instructs composters to use material that comes from plants while avoiding meats, dairies, etc.
* The program has developed 50 compost education “tip sheets” and welcomes the NCR Organics Task Force to use this material so long as NYC is appropriately accredited.
* According to Jodie, to maximize buy in and public/volunteer participation one must convey that “composting is cool.” Make demonstrations/activities fun or out of the ordinary (e.g. puppet shows, compost dances, etc.)
* The program has produced several highlighted success stories such as Karen Washington (Bronx Garden of Happiness, recognized by first lady Michelle Obama) and the Bon Secours project.

**Presenter 3: Jenny Thacker, Director of Education Programs for Seattle Tilth (including Q&A info from NYC’s Jodie Colon as well)**

* Seattle Tilth’s Master Composter/Soil Builder training program is funded by Seattle Public Utilities (SPU)
* Trains 30-35 Master Composter/Soil Builders each year.
* Each Spring: 4 evening sessions, 2-3 hours long and a 6 hour hands-on learning weekend session.
* They have 5 demonstration gardens and 2 learning farms; activities also include field trips to the Cedar Grove recycling facility
* Seattle Tilth considers its trainees as an outreach arm for SPU. As such, trainees must be knowledgeable enough to speak on several sustainability topics in addition to composting including natural yard care, water conservation, pesticide reduction, etc. Class sessions are taught by an MC/Soil Builder staff coordinator, a representative from Cedar Grove Recycling Facility, and various SPU experts on the above categories.
* Seattle regulations and the overall environmentally progressive nature of the city have made partnerships with both government (SPU) and other entities (e.g. Cedar Grove) natural. Seattle citizens must separate their organic waste for curbside collection (or $250 penalty) so individuals already have right mindset. Master Composters do work that benefits SPU initiatives so funding and facilitation of the program has been successful.
* However, curbside collection has reduced the participation in backyard composting so Seattle Tilth is refocusing efforts to promote it.
* They recruit a diverse cohort; 75 applicants/year; interview/screening process to accept 30-35 participants. Like Bernco and NYC, they want “enthusiasts who know the issue and want to make a difference.”
* In addition to the classroom/field trip requirements, program participants must complete 30 hours (also within one year of training) and have a “contacts” deliverable as well. In full, Seattle Tilth must produce 1,100 volunteer hours each year and reach 13,000 contacts. Much of this has been done by tabling around the city (90-100 people reached in a given day at table); however, tabling responsibilities has lead to a drop off in participation/interest of Master Composters.
* The Master Composter/Soil Builders budget is approximately $80-85,000/year.
* Seattle Tilth closes the loop (i.e. specifically returning finished compost that Seattle Tilth activities produce to program participants) via Cedar Grove. Cedar Grove takes all compost. They are happy to sell back to Master Composters - they produce more than they can sell so they donate a significant portion to community gardens. Seattle Tilth keeps close connection with Master Gardeners. In The Bronx does not have a Master Gardener program so tabling has also been a “connecting point” way to provide information and connect organic waste generators with compost suppliers.
* Seattle Tilth’s training is free; a deposit of $100 that is returned upon completion of service hours. Seattle Tilth has an 80-90% completion rate.
* In regard to the structure of a potential program in the National Capital Region (22 local jurisdictions), NYC has looked into a regional MC program, but has decided against it for the time being. Jodie mentioned that the DSNY (Sanitation) pays instructor/program budgets – she put in approximately 150 hours last year and runs the Bronx program with one assistant. In Seattle, MC’s are doing SPU’s work so funding and facilitation of the program has been successful. The general consensus for now is that the Organics Task Force use a similar model to NYC of “shared educational materials,” though funding may come from individual local government sources.
* In regard to relationships with public health departments and food scrap recycling, Seattle’s situation has been positive. The rodent concerns “are really no longer an issue” says Jenny Thacker, and haven’t been for at least a decade. They’re progress has come from well documented success stories that can be shared as proof of effective, well managed compost systems. In NYC, the biggest issue is open systems. In 2011, 200 of the 300 demonstrations/activities Jodie performed were technical assistance at compost sites (e.g. to control odors, vectors, improve bins, etc). Jodie’s advice is to go slow, make sure you can manage a given site and make sure enhancements/expansion will not trigger public health issues.
* Jodie also added that even though NYC does not have curbside food scrap collection, various compost sites process 200-300 lbs of food waste/week and the city is exploring expanding some to 6,000 lbs/week. Although this is quite small in proportion to the entire waste stream, it is promoting a decentralized community based composting infrastructure and setting the stage for greater potential.
* Jodie also added that she targets NYC’s public schools as they have a budget for “service learning/field trips” and kids enjoy chopping when it comes to preparing the organics for composting.
* In regard to whether composting has been used to drive community gardening, both NYC and Seattle believes that it can and has. Jodie added that in NYC, Brooklyn is extremely progressive, specifically in terms of food scrap composting, while this is a harder sell in the Bronx. In response to Northern Virginia having a contract to incinerate 135,000 tons, Jenny mentioned that Seattle had a choice in the 80’s to invest in incinerators or more sustainable solutions like MC training and they chose the latter.

**Next Steps for NCR-WSA**

* The NCR-OTF group agreed to form a “Master Composter Committee” to move the development of a regional training program forward. Volunteers include Russell Klein, Mary Van Dyke, Benny Erez, Will Herman, Kristen R. Goldman, Roy Croom, Pamela Gratton, Ashlea Smith, Clara Elias, Susan Eisendrath, Josh Lasky, Sandy Farber, , and Brenda Platt.
* Josh Lasky commented that the University of the District of Columbia would be willing to be a venue for training efforts.
* Sandy Farber who oversees UDC’s Master Gardener program also mentioned that there had been a metro regional training 15-20 years ago, indicating some precedent of a regional collaboration.
* John Snarr is open to investigating how MWCOG can support such a program.
* In Fairfax County, Pamela wishes to support this effort and will be connected with local extension agents via Mary Van Dyke. Kristen Goldman of Arlington County would also be interested in pursuing this. It was also noted that the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service does do workshops so should be included in the conversation.
* DPW’s Russell Klein noted that there is a need for more than just a one time capital investment, but rather a sustainable model. He also noted that the group should be conscious of the possible difficulty or apprehension of entities to fund full-time positions however.