COMPOSTING UPDATE: A COORDINATED EFFORT IN PROSPECT HEIGHTS

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By Liora Fishman

The Prospect Heights Community Farm (PHCF), on St. Marks Avenue between Vanderbilt and Underhill Avenues, stands as a testament to the power of collective environmental stewardship. The farm provides the opportunity to grow fresh produce, to

share it with the local community via efforts like Victory Garden and a communal herb garden, and to teach neighbors about urban agriculture, plants and vegetables alike. One of PHCF's lesser-known green initiatives is a dynamic composting partnership with the Park Slope Food Coop, fostering a closed-loop system that transforms organic waste into nutrient-rich compost. In an interview with Compost Coordinator Brian Thompson, he explained how PHCF partners with the Coop to further the mission of sustainable urban living.

Thompson shares his duties with fellow compost guru and Coop member Pamela Tuffley. Thompson has been an active member of the Coop for over 20 years and a dedicated participant in the community at PHCF for 16 years.

COMPOSTING PROCESS

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Steps of the composting process.
To get good compost, it generally needs to be turned every three or four days. Yes, there's a shift for that.

The Coop "Turner" shift at PHCF, established around a decade ago, involves the cooperative effort of members like Thompson who make sure the composting system runs smoothly. He says when he started doing this shift, it felt like, "a no-brainer… I was already doing regular turning shifts at the garden, so why not get credit for my labor at the Coop?"

> "THE IDEA OF CREATING SOIL WAS A WINNING CONCEPT."
>
> *—JOE HOLTZ*

The Coop's relationships with gardens for composting began in the 1980s. "The Coop initially started a partnership with the Garden of Union because it was mutually beneficial," said Sherry Showell, the Compost Squad leader. "The Coop didn't have to pay for heavy food scraps to be hauled away in the garbage, and the newly forming Garden of Union was in dire need of soil improvement."

Joe Holtz explained that the Garden of Union approached the Coop, asking what they did with food scraps that were not in good enough shape to be donated. "The answer was that we were putting it in the dumpster. We immediately stopped doing that because the idea of creating soil was a winning concept."

As the Coop grew, Garden of Union was unable to handle the full amount of compost each load contained. The Coop expanded their partnerships—which now include eight other gardens—to accommodate the increase. The Compost Squad, once only 15–20 people, now has about 100 participants.

Holtz also explained that the Coop covers the cost of compost bins and their maintenance. By having lighter trash loads, the Coop saves money, which it can the reallocate toward maintaining the composting system and the relationships the Coop has with gardens.

The composting process involves combining collected food scraps, known as “greens,“ with locally procured leaves and sawdust, or “browns,“ in a 1:1 ratio. This mixture is weighed, logged and processed through a four-bin system, with regular aeration and flipping. “Time in the system varies depending on weather, temperature, organic content and other nerdy factors,” noted Thompson.

Once the compost is cooked to perfection, it undergoes a cooling period before being sifted into the finished ”black gold“ available to both members and the wider community. Harmony in composting relies on the diligent hands of haulers, ”browns“ gatherers, turners and garden coordinators. From collecting food scraps to blending ”browns,“ managing piles and overseeing operations, each role contributes to the symphony of sustainability, ensuring our composting gardens thrive daily.


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This orange food waste is called “greens“ in the compost cycle.
On Sundays, PHCF receives food scraps from members and the community at large, typically around 200–300 lbs. per week. However, this figure has recently declined due to the introduction of the city’s orange ”smart bins“ and expanded curbside compost collection.

Participation in New York City’s compost programs has historically lagged behind that in other cities, according to an investigation into the new orange “smart bin“ program. In February of 2023, Mayor Adams announced that curbside composting would be available in all five boroughs by the end of 2024. *Curbed* reporter Clio Chang notes that some environmentalists have called the city’s program “greenwashing” due to the claim that the excess methane from the compost will be used to produce renewable energy. “Biogas is branded by the gas industry as ‘renewable energy,’ which obscures the fact that the result is still natural gas that produces emissions when burned,” Chang writes.

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Ultimately, GrowNYC, one of the associated composting organizations, estimated that New York’s community composting programs divert an estimated 4,150 tons of food scraps from landfills each year. To put that into perspective, Thompson shared that in 2023, the Coop provided approximately 1,800 lbs. of compost to the community farm.

And while the city-wide composting efforts have had an impact on the compost delivered to the PHCF, that might change soon. Mayor Adams has proposed a budget cut that would eliminate the composting effort’s budget almost entirely, making communi-

ty composting efforts like the one at the PHCF all the most integral.

Composting controversies and looming budget cuts aside, Thompson participates in the compost program because it's given him an opportunity to be "outside, in the garden, getting my hands dirty and communing with the birds that invariably take an interest in our aerating of their backyard, buffet and snacking station."

In the symbiotic relationship between these local gardens and the Park Slope Food Coop, a shared commitment to composting not only enriches the soil but also cultivates a greener, more interconnected community. "Our member labor system supports doing the right thing in regard to food waste," Holtz said. "It's yet another example of the Coop difference, and something our members should be proud of."

Liora Fishman lives in Prospect Heights, and has a dog named Ollie.