



# Zero-Waste Farmers Markets

Ideas and Best Practices from  
Eureka Recycling & Mill City Farmers Market  
Minneapolis, MN



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## BOTTLES & C



Eureka Recycling is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, based in the Twin Cities of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, that specializes in recycling and waste reduction and is driven by the mission to demonstrate that waste is preventable, not inevitable. Eureka Recycling's services and programs respond to the community's needs and concerns about the environmental and health problems caused by waste and provide opportunities for members of the community to experience firsthand the possibility that waste can be prevented. Perhaps most well-known for its recycling operations, Eureka Recycling has provided model curbside and apartment recycling services, education, and advocacy for over 20 years.

In addition to recycling services, Eureka Recycling's cutting-edge, economically sustainable programs in the Twin Cities metro area address composting, product stewardship, reuse and more, such as the Twin Cities Free Market, the Recycled Paper Co-op, Zero-Waste Event Services, Restaurant and Commercial Composting, Backyard & Worm Composting Workshops and more. These programs and services, combined with Eureka Recycling's advocacy and education efforts, help communities achieve their zero-waste goals.

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# Zero-Waste Farmers Markets

## Ideas and Best Practices from Eureka Recycling & the Mill City Farmers Market

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In the summer and fall of 2009, Eureka Recycling partnered with the Mill City Farmers Market of Minneapolis with funding from the City of Minneapolis' Climate Change Initiative grant program to learn what it takes to turn the Mill City Farmers Market into a zero-waste urban farmers market.

What follows are the lessons we learned from this endeavor, enriched by the Mill City Farmers Market's perspective and Eureka Recycling's years of waste-reduction experience. All cities, communities, farmers markets, vendors, and shoppers are unique, but this guide addresses some of the challenges and opportunities that will most likely be present for farmers markets anywhere.

### Is this Guide for You?

This guide will be most beneficial to farmers markets that are in communities with **commercial composting facilities** in place for food and non-recyclable paper. The public event side of a farmer market generates a lot of things like paper cups, plates and napkins, and bio-based plastic utensils. Therefore, for your market to become zero-waste, you will need to use a commercial composting facility that can accept all of those items in addition to your food scraps. This guide is written with this strategy in mind.

Although they are not addressed here, there are other ways for a farmers market to do some composting. For example, farmers may take their own food waste back to compost it on-farm, your market may be in a location where you can compost some food waste on-site, or there may be programs in your community that will collect just your food scraps for livestock feed. These can be good options for waste reduction as well, but won't get most markets to zero waste.

### Why Go Zero Waste?

Waste, and our choice to reduce waste, has a significant impact on the environment. The energy saving benefits of recycling have been touted for years—for example, making a new aluminum can from old cans results in 90-97% energy savings compared to making a new can from bauxite and other raw materials—but calculations about the benefits of composting are just surfacing. When food scraps are thrown in the trash, they contribute significantly to climate change. When these materials decompose in a landfill, they become powerful contributors to greenhouse gas emissions and when they are burned in incinerators they contribute to emissions and pollution. In fact, landfills are the single largest direct



human source of methane.<sup>1</sup> When composted instead, this material creates nutrient-rich soil that is in high demand to grow more food and healthy food because it reduces the need for chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and greatly improves soil quality.

When we recycle all that we can, and compost all that we can, we can easily see what's left in the bottom of our garbage can and make different choices and policies that help us avoid the few things that are left. According to the Product Policy Institute's report released in 2009, when you take into account the full lifecycle (including production) of the products we use and discard every day, non-food products and packaging account for 44 percent of total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>2</sup>

### **Making dirt, not waste**

Recycling is a familiar and accessible activity for most communities now, but the next step towards zero-waste, composting (on a commercial scale and at events), is just emerging or is still on the horizon for most communities. In places where composting is more established such as Berkley, CA; Boulder, CO; and Ithaca, NY, farmers markets are starting to incorporate zero-waste programs because recycling and composting naturally fit within their missions and commitments to community health and education.



Composting services are a particularly compelling component to add to farmers markets because they are about food. People are becoming more aware of the environmental impact of their food choices, and the farmers market connects them directly to where their food is coming from. A natural next step is to connect them to where their leftover food goes. As any farmer knows, healthy food starts with healthy soil. Composting leftover food at the market makes that direct connection and closes the food-to-food loop in a very visible, experiential way.

For more information on the environmental benefits of composting, recycling, and zero waste, see Eureka Recycling's full report *Recycling, Composting, and Greenhouse Gas Reductions in Minnesota* on our composting website: [www.makedirtnotwaste.org](http://www.makedirtnotwaste.org).

### **The composting movement and infrastructure**

Composting is a movement that is growing and gaining momentum throughout the U.S. and the world as a way to reduce waste and greenhouse gas emissions. Many communities have dedicated residents who compost in their own backyards. In addition, community-wide and commercial-scale yard waste composting sites are commonplace in most communities. Alongside this, people who have recycled for decades are looking for additional ways to reduce waste and are asking for ways to begin or expand their composting efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Platt, Brenda, et al. [Stop Trashing the Climate](#). Institute for Local Self-Reliance. June 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Stolaroff, Joshua, PhD. [Products, Packaging and US Greenhouse Gas Emissions](#), Product Policy Institute, September 2009.

Commercial-scale composting programs that can accept food waste and paper (that cannot be recycled) are not yet commonplace. These programs require additional investments in collection and composting operations, and may require significant changes to policies in order to make composting possible. They also need people who understand the benefits of composting and are motivated to separate their food scraps and non-recyclable paper for composting. Your community may already have a lot of public support for these types of composting programs and there may be a number of commercial composting facilities in your areas to support a variety of composting programs. In most communities, however, commercial-scale composting programs are in their infancy, which may make it difficult for you to find commercial services that can accept the materials you have to compost. This may also be an opportunity for your market to be a community leader to help grow the composting movement and compost programs. Whatever your situation, know that composting will only become easier and more mainstream as time goes on, and your market can be a part of that exciting change.

### **Composting in Minnesota:**

The food waste composting infrastructure in the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis is in its infancy stage. Like recycling 20 years ago, there is a growing movement of people who understand the benefits of composting and an emerging industry to collect the material and turn it into a soil amendment that is valuable for growing healthy food. However, there are only three facilities within reach of the Twin Cities that are currently permitted to accept food waste and non-recyclable paper for composting. This has greatly affected the number of established collection programs available that allow residents, businesses or events to compost.

Yard waste collected in Minneapolis (and most Minnesota cities) is processed into high-quality compost at private or public commercial compost facilities that are not permitted to process food waste and non-recyclable paper (like paper cups, plates, and napkins). In Minnesota, the policies governing compost facilities make a distinction between yard waste and “source separated organics” (food waste and non-recyclable paper) because source separated organics require a higher level of processing and monitoring to produce high quality compost.



Although current options are limited, the movement is growing and the political climate is shifting. For example, *Homegrown Minneapolis*, the city’s recommendations for a strong local food system, recognizes the significant role that composting plays in the local food system and calls for city policies, incentives and support of composting. The composting project at Mill City Farmers Market was made possible by support from the City of Minneapolis.

## Steps to a Zero-Waste Farmers Market

This document contains recommendations that can help you make the transition to zero waste from the beginning of the planning stage to the launch of your program. As you read, consider your market's unique situation, resources, and challenges. Are there community members or community organizations that share your waste reduction goals? Who would be interested in helping you plan for this project by volunteering or supporting it financially? How can you engage your vendors and shoppers in the project, or help them start thinking about the market's waste?

Like most projects, if your zero-waste program is a priority for only one or two people, it will be a struggle to make it successful. But if you can engage and inspire your shoppers, your vendors, and your community, it can do even more for your market than reduce your waste. Consider ways to use this program to form new community partnerships, begin or grow your volunteer program, spark new media attention for the market, or to form relationships with new funders, sponsors and donors.

### Step One: Know Your Current Program

The first step to a zero-waste market, even before any new recycling and composting can be implemented, is to gather information and get a full and clear picture of your market's current waste management system. This is necessary to transform your market from an entity that "manages" waste to one that demonstrates that our discards are not waste, but valuable resources that can be recycled, composted, and redesigned to be eliminated from the discard stream all together.

#### **Some important initial questions to answer:**

- Are you in a contract with a waste hauler?
  - Does the market have its own dumpster? Or do you share your waste services with another company or organization?
- How much waste does your market generate, and what's in it?
  - Take into account fluctuations in quantities due to seasonal changes, one-time events, weather, etc.
  - Do vendors dispose of waste in the market's dumpster? Are there any market policies or vendor rules that address waste?
  - A simple waste audit can tell you a lot about what is in your market's trash (see appendix A)

Knowing what is actually in your trash helps you focus and plan, and allows you to take some important waste reduction steps before you even change anything about managing your discards. For example, if you are noticing a lot of paper cups in the trash, it might be worth it to work with vendors to offer incentives for shoppers who bring reusable mugs. This information will also help you plan for the purchasing changes that will need to be made by the vendors/market, like compostable bio-based utensils instead of plastic utensils, paper plates instead of Styrofoam, etc.



Before you make major investments and adjustments, it can also be helpful to “take the temperature” of your staff, vendors, supporters, and shoppers so you know what kind of work you’ll need to do to drum up support, and where your natural sources of excitement and support are to tap into when you are ready to start your project.

## Step Two: Understanding What’s Involved in a Zero-Waste Market

Launching a zero-waste program involves much more than putting out new collection containers in the market. This section lays out some important considerations about building a realistic timeline and budget.

### Timeline

Depending on the unique situation of your farmers market, you may want to make the transition to zero waste over a season or part of a season, or to do it gradually over a few years. Either way, planning ahead and setting a timeline that is realistic for your market will support your staff members, volunteers, and vendors in creating a smooth shift to zero waste.

- Remember that this transition will affect your vendors – especially those who sell prepared food or do a lot of sampling. The earlier you can tell them what you are considering, the easier it will be for them to plan, and the less resistance you will feel.
  - Many vendors plan for the coming market season and purchase supplies as early as January.
- If your market hosts any special events during the season, you should also discuss your zero-waste goals with the event planners as soon as possible. In order for your event day(s) to remain consistent with your market, you should require that the event planners and partnering businesses and organizations switch to compostable serviceware, and should consider whether the event day will need additional zero-waste stations and volunteers.
  - Depending on the size of the event, these changes may have a significant effect on the event budget, so you should be ready to work together to overcome these challenges and communicate your success.
- If you currently share your trash dumpster with another business, factor in the time it will take to talk with them about the changes in service you would like. They don’t necessarily have to participate in the composting or recycling, but will have to at least agree to and be supportive of it.
  - If you don’t share a dumpster now, consider finding a nearby business to partner with who will use the service year-round. Depending on the state of composting infrastructure in your city, haulers may be reluctant to add and subtract you from their routes on a seasonal basis, and you may have an easier time getting a contract you are happy with and can afford if you find a year-round “anchor” business to share your composting service with.



### Budgeting

Like many sustainable choices that we make, this new program may cost more than your current waste management program, and will certainly require effort to make it a

successful, sustainable asset to your market. Once you decide that this is a project you would like to consider, it is important to take a detailed look at what resources the project will require, and what strategies you may be able to use in order to gather those resources.

Consider the following items when planning your project budget:

- **Hauling:** The addition of compost collection service may cause an increase in your overall hauling fees, especially if the commercial composting infrastructure is still new in your area.
- **Equipment:** You may decide to purchase new containers or other equipment to support your zero-waste efforts.
- **Supplies:** To ensure that they are actually fully compostable, any bio-based plastic bags, cups, utensils, and other supplies you purchase should be certified by the Biodegradable Products Institute ([www.bpiworld.org](http://www.bpiworld.org)). These supplies currently cost significantly more than their “regular plastic” counterparts, but we expect prices to decrease in the coming years as demand for these types of products increases.
  - Compostable bags
    - For collection of compostable material
  - Compostable service ware products (utensils, cups, straws)
    - For cooking demos
    - For events
    - Emergency supplies to sell to vendors
- **Volunteers:** Launching a zero-waste program will require additional volunteer recruitment, training, and incentives, which will impact hard costs and staff time allocations in your budget. (In our experience, this was the single biggest time and staff commitment associated with the zero-waste program.)
- **Staff time:** Even if you plan to rely heavily on volunteers, make sure you have accounted for enough staff time to manage this program, and consider including “zero-waste lead” specifically in one staff person’s job description. It may help to post an internship position to help manage the composting program in the first season.
- **Promotion:** Whether your market uses paid advertising, a public relations firm, or grassroots and word-of-mouth promotion, you should think about how you want to tell the story of your market’s zero-waste efforts, and what resources that will take.

### Step Three: Identify Your Hauling and Processing Options

Contact haulers that provide trash and recycling service to businesses in your area and ask them if they offer composting collection service (they may call it “organics collection,” “organics recycling” or “food waste recycling”). If your market already works with a waste hauler, you should include them in your survey, but you should contact other haulers as well to make sure you know all of your options. If you can find a hauler who understands and is willing to support your waste reduction and composting goals, they will be a huge asset to your program.

Whenever a hauler tells you they have a composting or food waste recycling program, find out where they take the food waste they collect and what types of material they accept. Some haulers collect food scraps to be manufactured into food for pigs and other livestock. While many businesses use these programs as a way to reduce their food waste, these programs would not get most farmers markets to zero waste. The majority of a typical farmers market's waste is made up of the disposable cups, plates, napkins and utensils distributed by prepared food vendors, and food-to-animals programs cannot accept these materials. Look for a hauler that will take all food waste and non-recyclable paper products to a commercial composting site where it is turned into nutrient-rich soil.



#### **A note on recycling**

While you are talking with haulers, you should also clarify what materials they accept in their recycling program and how materials should be sorted. What types of paper, plastic, aluminum, steel and glass do they accept?

Recycling programs vary, and your waste reduction efforts will be more successful if you understand the rules of your recycling program and include that information when you educate your staff, vendors and customers about composting. Even avid recyclers will need to know how your recycling program may be different from the program they use at home.

#### **Contract Considerations**

If you decide you would like to cancel your contract with your current hauler and start working with someone else, you will need to look at the terms of your current contract. When does the contract end? You may choose to try to end your current contract early, or to transition into your new contract and start your composting program when your current contract ends. Either way, many hauling contracts have a specific process you need to go through in order to terminate them or prevent them from automatically renewing. The new hauler you've identified should be able to help you through this process.

When you are establishing a relationship with a new hauler, or deciding to stay with your current hauler and add their composting service to your contract, consider adding some additional language and requirements to the contract that will support the success of your composting program.

- Request tonnage reports – knowing how much trash, recycling and composting your market generates can allow you to track and calculate the success of your program, and can give you interesting data to share with your community. If this is a strategy you would like to use, talk to your hauler about what kind of tracking they can do, and add this into your contract.
- Adjustments to your service levels – your hauler should understand your waste reduction goals and be willing to adjust your service as needed over time to support your efforts. As your vendors and customers get better at composting, you may need to increase your level of composting service and decrease your trash service (either by adjusting the size of your containers or the frequency of service).

## Step Four: Working Closely with Market Staff and Vendors

### Market Staff

Whether your market has a large staff or a small one, and whether your staff members are full time, part time, or seasonal, it is important to make sure they have a complete understanding of your zero-waste program. They will play a critical role in setting up and emptying containers, enforcing vendor requirements, talking to market shoppers about the program, and on-going training for the volunteers.

Have a formal staff training before the launch of the program. Your staff will be fielding many questions about the program and need to be prepared to talk to shoppers and vendors about the “big picture” of the project, including:

- why the market is doing this
- where the different materials go to be processed and what happens to them
- how the program works
- what goes in the composting, recycling and trash (and why)

**Training tip:** One effective training technique is to gather examples of materials that may be discarded in the market and sort through them together, talking about where each item goes and why. You should include items from the market and items customers may bring in from neighboring businesses. For example, you could use a plastic water bottle, aluminum can, to-go coffee cup, plastic shopping bag, and examples of the serviceware and sample cups your vendors use now, and the compostable items they will be switching to. This exercise will help you make sure you have answered all of your market staff members’ questions ahead of time so they will be able to answer with confidence when they are asked composting and recycling questions at the market.

### Requiring Vendor Participation

We recommend making participation in the zero-waste program mandatory for all vendors. This will greatly increase the success of your program, and reduce the confusion for market shoppers (and staff). If all of your prepared food vendors are not participating in the program, shoppers may pick up a plastic fork from one vendor and a similar looking corn-based fork at another and have a less than positive experience trying to figure out what goes where when they get to the containers.

However, even if the market makes participation mandatory, it will be important to recognize the additional work and potentially the additional cost for your vendors, and to do a little work to make sure they feel good about the program and good about their role in its success.



### **Recommended Vendor Requirements:**

- All prepared food vendors and all vendors who are sampling food at the market must use only compostable, BPI certified food packaging and utensils.
  - Compostable products include paper plates, paper cups (no Styrofoam or plastic insulation or lining), napkins, wooden toothpicks (no plastic frills!) and wooden coffee stirrers.
  - Compostable products also include bio-based plastic products such as utensils, clear cups, straws, and hot cup lids.
    - Any bio-based plastic products used by market vendors should be certified by the Biodegradable Products Institute to ensure that it is fully compostable.
  - If the majority of your shoppers do not have access to commercial compost collection at home, this requirement does not need to apply to packaging of food items that are sold for off-site consumption (i.e., produce, meat, cheese, loaves of bread, etc.). However, all vendors should be encouraged to reduce waste in any way they can (i.e., ask shoppers if they want a bag, accept egg carton returns from customers, etc.).
- Compostable material can be collected in paper bags or in BPI certified compostable bags, but NEVER in regular plastic bags.
- Vendors are required to sort all waste generated in their stalls appropriately into composting, recycling and trash containers, and deposit all materials in the appropriate dumpster or cart.
  - Vendors are responsible for training all people working in their stall on composting and recycling rules.
  - Any waste containers provided by a vendor should NOT be accessible to customers. Vendors should direct customers to the nearest zero-waste station.

### **Service ware**

Compostable bio-based plastic utensils, cups, and other service ware are just recently emerging into the market, so products and product availability is changing frequently and fast. There is also a rush to get in on the profit to be made from the growing interest in compostable products, and with that comes deceptively labeled products that claim or insinuate they are something that they are not.



For example, some products are labeled as “green” but are not compostable or intended for use in a commercial composting system. Other products may be labeled “compostable,” “degradable,” or “biodegradable,” but unless they have been tested and approved by an independent party, there is no way to know if they will actually fully compost in a commercial composting system, or whether they will leave behind heavy metals, small plastic particles, or other harmful residues in the process. For example, some products labeled “degradable” contain both bio-based material and plastics, and are engineered to break down into smaller pieces of plastic faster. However, they cannot be digested by the micro-organisms that are essential in the composting process, and the small plastic pieces are left intact in the soil.

Thankfully, there is an unbiased third-party certification organization (just like for Organic or Fair Trade labeling) that does the work of navigating these claims. The Biodegradable Products Institute is the leading organization that certifies materials and products that demonstrate (via scientifically proven techniques) that products are completely compostable in commercial composting facilities. By looking for their certification label and requiring only BPI certified products for use by your vendors, you can be confident that the products you choose to include in your commercial composting program are truly compostable.



Some products that are not BPI certified may indeed be compostable. However, beyond doing an incredible amount of research yourself into each and every product, requiring products that are BPI certified is the only way to ensure that your farmers market is generating uncontaminated, high quality compostable material that will support the growth and success of the commercial composting industry and the rejuvenation of depleted soils in your area.

For more information on BPI certification and standards, and a complete list of all BPI certified products, visit [www.bpiworld.org](http://www.bpiworld.org).

**Tips:**

- Research compostable products and create a directory of resources to help market vendors find products that will work for them.
  - Read the BPI website, and call retailers and restaurant supply companies that serve your area to find out which ones carry BPI certified products. Explain your program to them and tell them they may be getting calls from some of your vendors.
  - Make a list of these businesses to share with your vendors. Be sure to include language explaining what BPI certification is and why it is a requirement of your program. This can be a critical tool to help your vendors navigate the confusing, emerging market of compostable products. (It's a great task to delegate to an intern or volunteer!)
- Even if your vendors purchase and bring their own supplies, it's a good idea for the market to have a back-up stash of emergency compostable supplies available for vendors to purchase by the sleeve in a pinch, or to sell to one time vendors.
- The products your market/vendors will need may change with the season (for example, when it gets colder and serving soup starts to seem like a good idea) or as they try out different versions of cups, straws or lids to find what works for them and their product.
- Many vendors do ordering for the next season as early as January, so communicate your intentions and requirements around compostable products early and often!
- This requirement will need to be consistently reinforced. Vendors will encounter lots of advertising that makes cheaper products look just as good as BPI certified products, so it may take a little monitoring and enforcement work to make sure everyone continues to use the right serviceware.

## Vendor trainings and on-going communication

We recommend having a composting and recycling training for vendors before the season begins, and planning to continue checking on vendors and reinforcing composting and recycling information throughout the season.

A market staff person or volunteer should be assigned to walk through the market each day and make sure that prepared food vendors and vendors putting out samples all are using compostable serviceware. Even if vendors are excited about the composting program and understand it, sometimes plastic forks and cups can end up in their vehicle on the way to the market. It will be a lot easier to manage your composting program if you monitor what they are using and reinforce your expectations.



Each market will have different established communication methods with vendors – we recommend using them ALL to educate, remind, encourage and inspire vendors about your zero-waste efforts. Emails, website, orientation packets, meetings, and handouts are all excellent opportunities to remind vendors about requirements, update them about your results, share resources for buying compostable products, etc.

Don't forget one-time vendors! They will need an orientation and some advance notice about your zero-waste policies.

### Talking points for communicating with vendors:

- There aren't many businesses that don't want to be perceived as "green" these days. Help vendors with language and opportunities to tell their customers that they are putting in extra effort to support the market's composting program, which has a huge environmental impact.
- The zero-waste program can give the market a PR boost, which will draw in more customers.
- Finally, most likely vendors will not want to be "that vendor" whose materials are the only things that are not recyclable or compostable and are sitting in the bottom of the trash can. You are there to help them avoid that embarrassing position!

## Rogue Containers

Vendors may independently decide to provide an additional trash can that they place in front of their booth for their customers' convenience. These extra trash containers can be obstacles to your waste reductions efforts, because they provide customers with only one option at that particular discard opportunity: trash. These containers will collect material that could otherwise be composted or recycled at the market's zero-waste stations.

We recommend that you ask vendors not to provide additional containers for trash or composting in front of their stalls. Even if a vendor was interested in collecting compost in their extra container instead of trash, it would probably be contaminated by recycling and trash (because it would still only provide one option).

This change will feel less convenient to vendors and their customers, so you should make sure vendors understand why it is important, and know where the nearest zero-waste station is so they can direct their customers there.

**One exceptions to this rule:** If a vendor wants to provide a **small** container (i.e., quart- or pint-sized) to collect one type of small, compostable item, this can be manageable. Vendors who serve samples with toothpicks or small napkins, provide wooden coffee stirrers, or use similar items may want to consider this. Make sure containers are labeled clearly, i.e., “Compost Your Toothpick Here”.

## Step Five: Engage Volunteers

Volunteers are essential to the success of a zero-waste program. The most important role for them to play is monitoring the zero-waste stations to control contamination (clarifying which bin to put which items in) and to field questions and comments from your shoppers. We recommend one to two volunteers at each station at all times, which can take a significant amount of recruiting, offering incentives, and training. If you can get volunteers to commit to more than one shift, those repeat volunteers can be a real asset to your program.



- Give volunteers talking points on the frequently asked questions:
  - Why the market can compost more than you can in your backyard
    - Animal products go in the compost container because the materials are processed at a commercial-scale compost facility that generates enough heat to break them down safely
    - Plastic-*looking* bio-based plastic forks, knives, spoons, and cold-cups, go in the compost container because they are actually plant-based and will break down in a commercial compost facility
  - In many communities, there is a lot of confusion about recycling plastic. Be clear about what can be recycled and what can't in your program.
- Your volunteers don't need to be waste reduction experts; encourage them to direct people with more difficult questions to market staff or to a website with more information. Encourage the learning process!
- Having samples of compostable products (and non-compostable products, if any) being used in the market to exhibit while training volunteers is very helpful. Each day can be different, so if you have time you may want to go around before the market opens and collect samples of what vendors are using that day.
- Identify distinguishing characteristics of compostable products that are being used in the market, especially if there are still some regular plastic items being used. These can include things like the Biodegradable Products Institute logo, the letters “PLA”, or the name or logo of the company where the compostable products are sourced.
  - If a plastic-looking cup, bowl, spoon, etc. is from a neighboring business (rather than from within the market), they almost certainly aren't

compostable, unless your community already has a well-developed commercial composting system.

- Ask volunteers at the end of their shift for feedback – what are they hearing from your customers?

## Step Six: Invest in the Right Containers



Your composting and recycling program is about much more than having the “right” containers, but there are many container features that can be a great support to your program’s efficiency and effectiveness. You may be able to modify containers your market already uses to create some of these features, or you may want to invest in new containers.

However, none of the features listed here are as effective as a live person standing in front of the containers to help people make the right decision and answer their questions. Volunteers at each station, at least for the first season, really are a must!

### Some things to consider about recycling, composting, and trash containers:

- **Wheels:** Wheels on the composting carts make them easier to put out before each market, and much easier to move when they are full of composting. Depending on what is sold at your market, you may collect a large enough volume of bottles and cans to need wheels on those carts too.
- **Restricted openings and lids:** Both of these force people to pause and think for a moment (or at least a split second) before discarding whatever is in their hand. Wide open containers make it easy to discard items from several feet away without looking at the signs. We recommend lids with holes cut in them for collecting composting and recycling, and solid lids for trash cans, so that people have to intentionally lift them in order to throw something away.
- **Color:** Color helps distinguish composting and recycling from trash.
- **Narrow size:** Narrow containers are easier to push through crowds and fit into tight spaces.
- **Visual appeal:** Finally, consider the “look” of your market, and make sure your new containers don’t completely disrupt the aesthetic and feel.



### And a few thoughts on container placement and quantity:

- **“Paired” stations:** Human behavior is very predictable – people will discard whatever is in their hand in the nearest and most convenient container. If there are single trash cans out that do not have a composting and recycling cart next to them, you can expect to capture less material for recycling and composting. All

- zero-waste stations should include well labeled containers to collect composting, recycling and trash.
- **Number of stations:** When you think about staffing all of your stations with volunteers, you may end up with fewer stations in the market than people are used to seeing. It may take your customers and vendors a little while to get used to this, but it can be quite manageable, especially if your stations are well placed and have enough containers at each one.
    - If you do decrease the number of locations for containers, you may want to consider adding flags, windsocks, or tall signs to your zero-waste stations to help people find them through the crowds.
    - All vendors should know where the stations are so they can direct customers to them
  - **Number of containers:** Once you know how many stations you want to have, you should compare them to the number of trash cans you currently have. If it is a lot less, you may want to have more than one composting container at each station.
  - **Location:** Watch your traffic patterns, think about where people eat and have things to discard. Which trash cans fill up the quickest now? Focus your stations on those areas.

**Tip:** You may want to purchase an extra set of containers so you can set up an additional station for one-time events and busy days.

#### **Other recommended equipment:**

- **Litter grabbers:** These are available at most hardware stores and are a great tool to provide to your staff and volunteers. They make it easy to move items from one container to another when they end up in the wrong place, and keep hands much cleaner.
- **“Fish scale”:** If you decide you would like to track your composting, trash and recycling – even occasionally – a “fish scale” is an inexpensive tool that can help you gather data and report on the success of your program. They are sold at sporting goods stores, and intended for weighing fish (a small, handheld scale that weighs items on a hook), but they also work great for weighing tied bags of composting, recycling and trash!

## **Step Seven: Educate**

Education is a critical component to your zero-waste program, both for vendors and for shoppers. Communicating broadly and clearly about your zero-waste goals helps motivate participation, create a sense of community and pride, clear up confusion, get you the attention for your efforts that you deserve, project the values held by your market and encourage your customers to bring those values into practice at home!

## Developing Messages:

As you communicate the “hows” of the program, like what goes in which bin, don’t forget to tell people about *why* the market is committing to zero waste, and what the environmental benefits and impacts of these choices are!

## Delivery Methods:

- Markets are not often the easiest place to employ printed educational material (there are not usually many places to hang posters), so you’ll have to think about where you have the opportunity to “talk” to people.
  - Do you send out regular emails?
  - Can you set up a booth with information and demonstrations?
  - Are there vendors that would consider displaying something about the program on their tables or tents?
- Does your market have a website where you post seasonal produce availability or programming schedules?
- If your market has the space and is set-up to hold workshops, backyard and worm composting workshops can be a great compliment to the program, so your customers can learn how to incorporate waste reduction into their own homes.



## Get attention:

A launch event, press event, or party of any kind to kick off your program or celebrate a season’s worth of results will help you generate excitement and support for your new project, and thank those who helped to make it happen.

## Conclusion

Making your market zero waste will take effort, planning, money, and commitment, but the impact you make is incredible. Not only will you greatly reduce your carbon footprint and re-engage with the natural food-to-food circle, but you’ll pay it forward by creating the opportunity for your vendors and shoppers to experience zero waste as a possibility and make changes in their own lives.



When we chose to shop at a farmers market, we are choosing to use our values to guide our purchasing decisions. We know our dollars are making a difference to support our community, healthy, local food, and the farmers who grow that food. But when we get our coffee at the market in a Styrofoam cup and have to throw it away to be burned or buried, we are left feeling like we might have just negated all the good we did with our food purchases. Our positive experience choosing healthy local food is undermined by the negative experience of wasting. We may feel we have compromised the values that brought us to the farmers market in the first place. These disconnected experiences can erode our confidence that we can make a difference.

Integrating opportunities for environmental benefit is motivating and empowering for the people who experience it, and strengthens the momentum and impact of all causes. Healthy food and zero waste are simply different strategies to bring us all to the same goals – health, safety, and happiness.

We hope the experiences and reflections presented here will be useful. While this was the first project of its kind in Minnesota, there are more and more opportunities and examples to look at all the time. The composting movement is growing stronger and more vibrant by the day. Please join us to Make Dirt, Not Waste!



We welcome any feedback or experiences you're willing to share with us!

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## Appendix A: Visual Waste Audits

Visual audits are methods of collecting data about the types and quantities of materials that are currently found in trash and recycling bins. Visual audits are a useful tool in gathering some basic information about what is being thrown away, what is being recycled, and what could potentially be recycled, composted, or even eliminated from the waste-stream. Visual audits can also identify trends that relate to waste disposal and can provide information about how visible the recycling program is to market shoppers.

To get a clearer picture of your market's current waste, decide when, and how often, you want to do a visual audit. You will get the most complete picture if you are able to audit your waste a few times throughout the season, but even information from a single audit can be very useful as you develop strategies to reduce waste at your market.

### Observing container quantity and placement

Walk through the market and count the number of trash and recycling containers that are out. Where are they? Are they easy to see? Are they in the same place during every market? Does the number of containers change for different parts of the season?

### Observing discards

Look at the contents of the market's trash and/or recycling bins. Be sure to look in public containers, containers behind vendors' stands, and the dumpsters or carts provided by your hauler. Gloves or litter grabbers can help you look below the surface, and photos can help you document the findings.

- What types of materials are there?
- Can you tell whether they came from within the market or were brought in from outside?
- Is there recycling in the trash?
- Is there trash in the recycling?
- Does the trash contain materials that could be composted, replaced with a recyclable or compostable alternative, or eliminated completely?



You may also want to work with your market staff to track how often containers are emptied and how full they are, which will give you a general idea of how much material is discarded at your market each day.

### Observing behavior

Visual audits can also provide insight to how market shoppers interact with recycling and composting containers after your program has been implemented. By observing people as they discard material at a paired station with recycling, composting and trash containers, you can gather information about how visible the stations are and how the education is perceived.