



Insider tips on

*running a food waste
organics/composting
program*

How to be circular without re-inventing the wheel

In the journey to a climate resilient circular economy, you can never underestimate the power of community action.

Community efforts to tackle climate change and create a sustainable future are on the rise, and if you are inspired to be part of this movement, this guide is for you.

In this guide you will find practical information and key learnings for groups and organisations that want to establish a community-based food waste organics/composting program, including how to approach the critical planning, implementation and evaluation phases. There are also useful resources and networks to support your planning, knowledge building, and communications.

The knowledge in this guide comes directly from the experiences of local community groups, social enterprises and other not-for-profits who were supported by Sustainability Victoria's [Circular Economy Communities Fund](#) – we will refer to them as our “CE insiders” throughout this guide. The communities fund, delivered on behalf of the state government, challenged local communities to explore creative solutions for waste management with activities that built local skills, encouraged social connections and created new social enterprise opportunities.

There is no single solution to any challenge or opportunity. Your initiative should take into account your stakeholders and communities, sector, resources, capacity, and overarching goals.

About Sustainability Victoria

Sustainability Victoria shapes Victoria's circular economy on behalf of the state government. We partner across industry and the community as a transition broker for the circular economy. Our goal is to reduce or stop waste before it starts, in every part of the system.

Sustainability Victoria leverages community and industry action to reduce emissions. Whether we are creating education campaigns to deliver better recycling, investing in repair cafes, embedding sustainability across Victorian schools, or providing solutions for the safe disposal of e-waste and chemicals, we empower Victorians to design their own circular future.

You can also download guides for other types of community-based circular economy initiatives:

- Bicycle repair/recyclers
- Repair hubs and cafes
- Food rescue and distribution
- Hard waste recovery
- Textile waste
- Special waste streams

Food waste organics/composting

Food waste organics initiatives minimise waste by turning unwanted food into valuable and useful products, such as dehydrated food, mulch, and compost.

It's important to consider all of the following steps on your path to success. For food waste organics/composting recovery initiatives, we have highlighted specific key learnings that are worth further consideration because they may present more challenges and opportunities along the way.

Phase 1: scope and plan

Establish baseline community need and capability

CE insiders recommend you learn about the employees, volunteers, cooks, and urban farmers in your target area. Find out about their knowledge of food waste, their buy-in to circular economy ideals, and attitudes and behaviours regarding producing food in urban settings using organic waste.

Understand where your materials are coming from and how to get them to you. Know your workers' abilities to build compost hubs and raised garden beds. Evaluate how enthusiastic your community is about your idea.

Understand who else in your area works in this industry and how your organisation will differentiate itself. Consider who you might collaborate with, who might help you out, and identify your strategic partners.

Plan your program

Identify your key reason for doing the work, for example it may be working towards a safe planet, equity of access to food, using finite resources wisely, or caring for self, others and the environment. CE insiders say that articulating what drives you will also help connect others to your vision. Then you can think about the activities that will help you achieve your greater vision.

Consider some of these activities that our CE insiders are doing:

Tick those that apply to your program

Collect and deliver food waste and green waste from households or retail. This may include running and maintaining vehicles or running a pool of volunteer drivers.

Run a compost hub/Bokashi/bin system to collect unwanted food waste.

Run and maintain a food dehydrator to process green and food items.

Package and sell processed compost, mulch, and dehydrated foodstuff.

Run composting and gardening workshops to encourage eating fresh food grown using food waste.

Harvest produce from urban farm lots to include in food relief packages and community lunches.

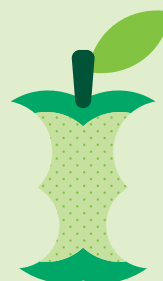
Run a store or market stall to sell fresh food items.

Collect food scraps from local cafes.

Partner with farmers' markets to take leftovers.

Keep poultry and chickens.

Experiment with a Biodigester that creates gas.



Set your boundaries

To refine the scope of your program you'll need to balance your capacity with community need. You should also factor in the equipment and facilities you have access to and your location. Consider the energy impacts of your machinery, including the power requirements and your greenhouse gas emissions. Also consider your local council's permit requirements for the systems and building that you're planning.

At this point, plan how you will use or distribute the compost, because these decisions will have a big impact on your program's business model. Will you give your compost away for free or will you require a small donation? Decide if you want your compost to be certified organic. While the certification process can be expensive, you may need it if you want to sell your product at a competitive rate.

Think about what sort of arrangement would best work for you. Whether you decide to run hot compost, worm farms or black soldier fly colonies, you should take into account:

- The preferences of your local demographics.
- Making your compost hubs and garden beds visible and accessible.
- The odours and aesthetics of your set up. Keep in mind that you are part of a neighbourhood environment, maybe even in a community space.
- Having a visible and accessible dining space, if community lunches are part of your plan.
- What specific plants your community wants and needs.
- Ensuring you have a food storage space that's both usable, secure, hygienic and accessible for workers. If you are using tubs, make sure they fit into your circular waste economy.
- The availability of employees, volunteers, gardeners, and cooks.

Manage risk and maintain memorandums of understanding (MOUs)

Assess your risks

Understand the risk profile of your intended activities and take steps to mitigate risk through appropriate insurance, disclaimers and management processes. Mitigation could include volunteer training, induction, and registration or certification.

Understand your agreements

MOUs are the agreements you have with your key partners, such as business donors and volunteers. They are useful in establishing clarity around everyone's roles and responsibilities to help you minimise risk and build productive partnerships.

To ensure compliance, you should make sure your staff and coordinators are aware of any contractual and MOU arrangements relating to their facilities, tools and equipment.

Design activities to change behaviours

CE insiders say the best practice approach to changing behaviour is to make it as easy and convenient as possible.



You could consider:

Tick those that apply to your program

Encouraging people to safely store then donate excess food products, i.e. providing food waste containers for the home and easy deposit systems at your facility.

Educating the community about responsible donating to reduce unnecessary dumping of food through the composting process, i.e. a do's (e.g. fruit and vegetable scraps with their sticker removed at home) and don'ts (e.g. no meat) list for participants.

Working with retailers and manufacturers to adopt more sustainable processes to prevent end-of-life-grocery dumping, i.e. organising donation systems for charities and neighbourhood houses.

Encouraging appropriate disposal of food items that your program can't cook or donate.

Changing purchasing behaviour, i.e. only buy what is needed.

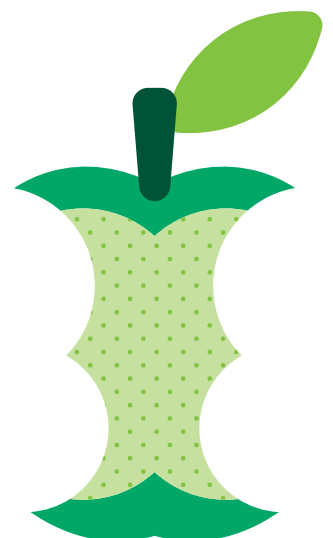
Attending community events to increase the awareness of your services.

Targeting people who do not usually use kerbside recycling, e.g. businesses and apartment blocks.

Using education resources to promote the above, i.e. workshops, posters, leaflets, websites and social media.

Try to design your engagement activities, programs and initiatives in a way that you can evaluate their usefulness and effectiveness in impacting behaviour change. This will also help you demonstrate your value to key stakeholders, including funders.

Clarify your measures for being effective and set small goals along the way. Define what success looks like for your program. It may create other positive impacts even if it ultimately finishes.



Phase 2: implement program

Run an efficient program

The relationships, processes and systems established here will impact your program's success. Since most food waste prevention and composting programs operate on thin margins, careful administration of resources is important.

CE insider tips:

Tick those that apply to your program

Create a triage system to collect, weigh, sort, store and process waste as soon as it arrives.

Weigh your waste going in and your compost coming out. This will help you monitor how you use it and scale your program accordingly. It will also help you collect data to demonstrate your value to communities and funders.

Make your donation criteria clear to your community and your team. Many community initiatives don't accept donations in compostable bags.

Remove fruit stickers from food. Some programs insist donors remove them before donating. Other programs have volunteers sifting through newly arrived material to remove them.

If you are composting, have a source of 'brown material' available like dried leaves or wood shavings to absorb moisture and increase carbon content. Wood shavings work well if they are clean and if they're readily available. But not all leaves make good brown waste, for example, plane tree and eucalyptus leaves do not break down easily.

Decide early if you will take green waste and grass clippings. This will depend on your capacity. Many people will donate in high volumes, and this might upset the balance of materials needed for good compost.

Drill holes to allow the compost to breathe. Don't waste your waste! Start with small bins before going to bigger tubs.



Manage contamination and pests

Establish a monitoring system to avoid contamination and to control rodents and pests. It takes skill to manage a healthy compost system. And contamination can cost you time, equipment and money. Vermin may be a sign that the compost needs to be turned more often. Consider vermin mesh to minimise mess and install rodent-proof compost bays.

Look after your relationships

Manage your relationships with stakeholders and corporate partners to ensure they're productive. Give people reusable containers to take compost away, for example yoghurt tubs or used coffee bags from roasters.

Clear communication will also help you improve your systems and processes. For example, one composting initiative found that the food waste bins they were supplying to restaurants were too cumbersome and subsequently not effective.

CE insiders say it's important to involve everyone who will be impacted in the decision making to ensure you're getting the right information to build your program. This will also foster enthusiastic stakeholders.

Engage diverse communities

Consider the most appropriate platforms for communicating about your programs and whether or not you plan to target certain groups – different demographics use different media types. If you understand the demographic profile of your local community, you can improve information about food waste and using leftovers so that it's accessible to groups like migrants and refugees.

Set your team up for success

CE insiders say it's important the staff and volunteers who run your program have the appropriate training processes and can access the right manuals or resources.

CE insider tips:

Tick those that apply to your program

Have clear position descriptions that outline volunteers' roles, responsibilities and required skills.

Train and employ a team to sort and load waste into compost hubs, dehydrators or mulch heaps.

Support your volunteers to contribute what they signed up for because this ensures you have the right workforce and a happy team to achieve your goals.

Think about food-handling regulations, as well as your specific insurance requirements, and what workplace safety requirements you may need for your volunteers, cooks, and gardeners.

Have a clear plan to adapt to workforce changes and find ways to maintain your volunteers' enthusiasm, as you may find your volunteer workforce fluctuates with the seasons.

Consider the needs of volunteers and staff who deal with food waste and what guidance they might need. Write down a list of the key equipment and practices that will keep them safe. This may include providing your team with masks and gloves, making sure everyone is wearing strong boots, and stretching before mixing compost and taking breaks every 10 minutes when turning the compost.

Provide ongoing support for people who are supporting your program. Check in with them and see how they're going. You might provide intensive training to boost their skills. And offer the people who use your information ways to provide feedback.



Circular collaboration

Food waste organics/composting programs are more effective when they work together. Consider other organic waste/compost initiatives as a supportive and informative network that can help you achieve your shared circular goals.

Think about how you might be able to promote collaboration with each other, for example:

- Help each other with consistent messaging.
- Share knowledge of public event opportunities.
- Share gardening tips, seeds, tools where appropriate.
- Provide local support to broader education campaigns.
- Share each other's social media content.

Your program will be much stronger and more likely to achieve results if you can identify opportunities for partnership with existing organisations, such as local government, state government, local businesses, community centres, and neighbourhood houses.

Phase 3: evaluation and improvements

Use your learnings to make improvements

Program managers succeed when they think about how they might improve future practice. This might mean sharing knowledge gained with your team, or debriefing with other programs and providers. It could even mean developing case studies for best practice.

When a new or unexpected donation issue arises, think about ways you can record or document the solution so that it can be repeated or applied elsewhere. Set up an easy-to-use document management system so that everyone can access information quickly. There are free document management systems, such as Google Drive and OneDrive.

Understand your finance and business obligations

A key tip from the CE insiders we spoke to is having people on your team who understand finance and the obligations of running a business. Complement strong business and finance knowledge with good financial systems that help you understand quickly how your organisation is performing so that you can respond appropriately.

All programs rely on fundraising, grants and donations, so this will become an important part of your activities.

Financial viability is important to all food waste organics composting programs. You can encourage this by:

Tick those that apply to your program

Being aware of funding opportunities from philanthropic organisations and different levels of government.

Recording data and monitoring waste (by weight or volume) to communicate the value of your work. For example, show the quantity of produce saved from landfill.

Teaching your volunteers and staff to write successful applications.

Setting up ways to encourage donations.

Putting a dollar value on waste from donors, especially corporate donors.



Demonstrate your value

By collecting data on waste avoidance you can show the value of your work to key stakeholders, such as the venue, community and funding bodies. This measuring and storytelling can help you build your community and secure funding and resources for your program.

Darebin Fruit Squad



In 2023, the Darebin Fruit Squad didn't rescue as many summer fruits as expected due to the adverse growing conditions of the La Nina weather pattern, as well as rodents and possums taking the fruit. They responded by sending out a flyer that told the organisation's story. This helped the team approach businesses because these potential partners already had some information about the initiative and understood the value of their work. Read more. www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/news/news-articles/urban-orchards-share-their-crops-with-the-local-community