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Down to Earth: Composting Made Easy

Mixed in with all the trash at the landfill, is a lot of leftovers straight from the kitchen table.

"In Dane County, 16-percent of it is comprised of food," said Sonya Newenhouse with the Madison Environmental Group.

It's a stat that got Judy Skog of Madison to thinking. So every day for the past decade, she loads up a bowl in her kitchen with food waste, and then dumps it into her compost pile behind her garage. On Tuesday, she added pieces of squash, lime, egg shells, and coffee grounds, filter included. This day there was also squash, coffee grounds, and egg shells.

Newenhouse said it appears more people are trying to follow Skog's lead as environmental awareness increases.

If you think day after day of mixing in tablescraps would stink, think again. To make sure it doesn't smell, Skog mixes in yard waste like leaves, and adds water occasionally. Then she lets it stew. "You don't even need a bin," said Skog, although she has one. "You just need a place where the stuff can just rest there for six months to a year, maybe two."

Here's the best part for Skog and other composters. They've kept it out of the landfill. They can then re-use it as fertilizer.

"Then you don't need to buy as much fertilizer," said Newenhouse. "And that's much healthier for our soils and our lakes."

"Compost can be used on any type of flowers," said Skog. "You just have to be more particular about what you use on food." That's because composted materials like used paper towels. If they were used with cleaning chemicals, the chemicals could leach from the compost into the food you're trying to grow in a vegetable garden, so it's best to be careful.

Skog now loves composting so much, she's begun two more compost piles composed of yard waste and straw.

Newenhouse said those who own or rent a house are best suited for composting since they have a use for the fertilizer. Skog advises not to throw meat into your pile because it will attract wildlife. Some oils and dairy are also out because they slow down the ability to decompose.

Apartment and condo dwellers may want to type 'vermacomposting' into a search engine. This allows you to compost in a bin that would fit in a closet, and use worms to do the decomposing. A book on the subject is titled 'Worms Eat My Garbage.'