



## San Francisco's groundbreaking composting program celebrates 25 years

In the early '90s, the City of San Francisco commissioned a study to analyze the material San Franciscans sent to landfill. It showed much of the material could have been composted. So, in 1996 the City asked Recology to see if we could collect food scraps for composting and if San Franciscans would participate.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of San Francisco's curbside composting collection program.

Together — residents, businesses, city officials, and Recology employees — fully embraced curbside collection for food scraps and yard trimmings (sticks and leaves).

In the process, we reinvented the way San Francisco does trash, and our green bin program has become an international model.

We transform food scraps and yard cuttings into finished compost that helps farms improve soil health, save water, and grow healthy fruits and vegetables that come back to our tables.

When we compost at the curb, we help turn farms into carbon sinks. That's because farms use SF compost to grow mustard and other cover crops that pull carbon out of the atmosphere and sequester it deep in the soil, where it belongs.

No single solution to all our environmental challenges exists, but San Francisco's green bin program is widely recognized for benefiting the environment. We are often asked: How did San Francisco make it happen?

We started at the wholesale produce market in spring 1996. Within two months, we began collecting food

**We have diverted 2.5 million tons of compostable material from landfill.**

scraps at some of the largest hotels in San Francisco.

We ran a pilot program in the Richmond District and asked residents to put their vegetable peelings, coffee grounds, and other compostable



**Ross Anderson and Teresa Evans are curbside composting enthusiasts. They like that their food scraps create nutrient-rich compost (right) that helps grow juicy peaches and other fruits and vegetables that come back to their table.**



discards in green composting collection bins.

Industry magazines quoted managers at other trash companies who said collecting food scraps separately would never work. We encountered many challenges in the early years, but we kept going.

In 2001, city officials instructed Recology to make curbside compost available to all properties on a voluntary basis. We delivered thousands of green bins.

Each year more people would start composting. In 2009, the City passed an ordinance making the program mandatory, and everyone got on board.

In 2018 Recology built the West Wing, a building at the Transfer Station next to Highway 101, to receive compostable material brought in by collection trucks. Inside, the material is loaded into 18-wheel trucks and taken to regional composting facilities.

Fortunately, more people around the world learn about the program every day, and they push their communities to follow San Francisco's lead.

In February, 84-year-old Gretel Clark did precisely that when she convinced her hometown of Hamilton, Massachusetts to replicate San Francisco's compost program. Inspired by Gretel, Hamilton officials made participation mandatory for all properties.

Bravo Gretel. Bravo Hamilton. Bravo other cities and universities for instituting curbside composting collection for food scraps and yard trimmings. Many thanks and much credit to all San Franciscans for starting a very good thing.

Together, we can do anything.

# Green bin collection pioneer still going strong

**M**artin Renteria was working as a Recology sorter when his boss encouraged him to get his Class-B license and become a collection driver. He did, and then Martin made history.

Martin became the first curbside composting collection driver in the nation when Recology assigned him to the first such route in San Francisco.

The year was 1996. San Francisco was the first large city in the country to collect food scraps separately from other discards for composting.

Martin's first collection route was in the Richmond District as part of the curbside compost pilot program.

Many customers feared their green bins would smell, so some would freeze

their food scraps or wrap them in newspaper, Martin said.

When customers hesitated, Martin encouraged them to start by composting coffee grounds and banana peels, and they did. As the program expanded, Martin worked in different neighborhoods, including Sea Cliff, the Bayview, and Twin Peaks.

Today, Martin empties green bins in the Mission District. He said San Franciscans between the ages of 40 and 70 are experienced curbside composters.

"Younger people need more encouragement," he said.

Before the pandemic, Martin used his vacation time for traveling. He has visited Spain, Italy, France, and Canada.



Those countries and more than 100 others have sent delegations to San Francisco to see our city's recycling programs firsthand. Many visitors return home wanting their communities to replicate San Francisco's green bin program.

"I hope all the countries will do it," Martin said, tilting another green bin into his collection truck.



## Support food security — compost

**S**an Francisco's curbside composting collection program plays an important supporting role in nature's life web. Food comes from farms. Food scraps such as coffee grounds, eggshells, and vegetable peelings should go back to farms as finished compost.

"If I harvest five tons per acre, I need to put it back in the soil. With compost and cover crops, I'm feeding the ground," said Frank Olagaray, owner of Blossom Vineyards. Frank and his team grow almonds, walnuts, olives, and wine grapes on 1,600 acres near Walnut Grove.

Frank and other farmers use compost in multiple ways. One is

to grow cover crops such as barley, flax, and mustard between rows of trees and grapevines to protect and enrich the soil. Some farmers apply compost directly over plant roots. Others broadcast a thin layer of compost across their farms to feed the microbial colonies in topsoil.

Applying compost returns carbon to the soil. Cover crops grown with compost pull additional carbon and nitrogen out of the atmosphere and fix carbon deep in the soil.

The humus and organic matter in compost retain water from rain and irrigation, making water available to both microbes and

plant roots. That's critical to helping crops thrive, especially in times of drought.

These positive outcomes achieved with compost support food security, a term the pandemic has brought home for many of us. California farms are a breadbasket for the nation, and compost made from materials collected through San Francisco's green bin program helps grow an increasing variety of Northern California crops.

It is vital that we keep this good work going and encourage other cities to do the same. That will directly benefit our soils, climate, water cycle, and families.

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