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Bend restaurants collect food waste for a farm that turns it into fertilizer

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By The Associated Press

BEND -- More than a year after three restaurants in Bend's Old Mill District started collecting food waste so that Fields Farm could turn it into fertilizer, the restaurants are still sending off compost material by the bucketful. And the Old Mill hopes to add more restaurants to the composting effort in 2011, said Noelle Fredland, Old Mill marketing manager.

"We're very much looking forward to having the program expand," she said. Currently, Cafe Yumm, Pastini Pastaria and Strictly Organic Coffee Co. are participating. Employees put food waste and coffee grounds in 5-gallon buckets and empty the buckets into a larger bin by the recycling and trash receptacles.

Twice a week, someone from Fields Farm picks up the material and takes it back to the Bend farm, where it is composted and turned into fertilizer to help grow vegetables sold at local farmers markets.

"We're always looking for new and different ways to push sustainability," Fredland said, "And it's an important thing for us to do as a community, and it's an important thing for us to do as a business."

At Cafe Yumm, workers take the ends of zucchini, onion skins, pits and skins of avocados and more, and toss them into four buckets in the prep area, said Karli Foster, co-owner and general manager of the restaurant.

"As we're making food to order and when tickets come through, we can put that compost right there," she said. It wasn't hard to make the switch to throwing scraps into the compost buckets, she said -- workers were already used to sorting out recycling and other materials. And as a green-minded restaurant, it meshed with the company's philosophy, she said.

"It's been fantastic," she said. "The busier we are, the more we see we're composting."

Because so much material is composted, the restaurant only needs garbage pickup once a week instead of two or three times, she said.

"We really don't have a lot of garbage," Foster said.

Strictly Organic has sent coffee grounds to Fields Farm for years, said Rhonda Ealy, co-owner of the coffee shop.

"Composting and reusing and recycling as much as we possibly can -- that's a way of life for us and always has been,"

she said.

But with the Old Mill program, the management company took the lead and organized the effort, Ealy said, making it easy for the restaurant to participate.

"It's a great program," she said, noting that the Old Mill store fills two or three 5-gallon buckets a day, just with coffee grounds.

Jim Fields, owner of Fields Farm, said he's also happy with the program. He composts the food waste and coffee grounds with horse manure and other material to create a fertilizer that he uses to grow vegetables on his Bend farm. The compost mixture bumps up the organic matter in the soil, he said. Most organic farms don't make their own compost, Fields said, since doing so is almost like an additional operation that farmers have to manage.

"It's so much more expensive and time consuming," he said. But the mix of material -- coffee grounds from all over the world, vegetable scraps from different regions and other material like hops -- adds different elements to the fertilizer, he said. Making compost with waste from area restaurants keeps things local, and uses resources from central Oregon, he said.

"We really like this low-energy lifestyle," he said.

The biggest challenge in the program has been making sure employees know what goes in the compost bin, Fredland said. A busy summer followed by the hectic holiday season has slowed the process of other restaurants joining the program, she said, and other businesses such as Greg's Grill and Anthony's have separate programs for food recycling.

But she said she would like to get other restaurants, including the new Jimmy John's Gourmet Sandwiches, on board in January. Craig McCollum, co-owner of Jimmy John's, said the restaurant donates leftover usable food to a shelter but would be open to the composting program for food waste.

Fredland hopes the program continues.

"It's definitely a winning proposition for everyone," she said. "It reduces our overall waste, helps out Fields Farm, (and) it reduces the cost of our trash."