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Composting at Parkland College

All of the projects that I work on at Parkland relate to the Wesley Food Pantry @ Parkland. I decided last summer that I wanted to work with the Horticulture program to grow a garden to feed 30 pantry families. I also saw that the Hospitality program was tossing vegetable and fruit scraps in the trash and I wondered if the cafeteria, which is operated by Chartwell's, was doing the same. My idea was to collect all the scraps weekly and transport them over to the composting barrel just outside the Horticulture building. The compost could be used to start seedlings or used in the garden.

This century will be all about living life using green practices. I believe that Parkland College should adopt green practices as part their contribution to the community. According to the book *Composting for Dummies* by Cathy Cromwell (John Wiley & Sons, 2010), recycling organic wastes where they're generated, rather than transporting them to a landfill, is an integral part of today's earth-friendly lifestyle. Utilizing these scraps for compost will reduce the amount of methane produced from landfills. The topsoil which holds all the essential nutrients gets eroded by wind and runoff from rain and snowfall. Composting helps to replenish those nutrients, provide fuel for the organisms working to decompose organic material and for healthier plants. Composting helps reduce soil compaction allowing water to penetrate the soil.

Compost is a soil like substance that is a combination of decayed and decaying organic matter that improves soil structure and provides nutrients for plants. Compost consists of organic materials in various stages of decomposition. Some material is broken down quickly, other material may take more time to break down. Compost is a food web containing groups of ever larger inhabitants consuming plant material and each other.

Composting requires keeping a balance between the *browns* and *greens*. The term browns is used to describe carbon-rich materials mostly brown in color like dry leaves, woody plant trimmings, straw,

sawdust and all kinds of paper products. The term greens is used to describe nitrogen-rich materials mostly green in color like vegetable and flowers but also things like eggshells and coffee grounds. To keep your compost healthy it must be aerated which is what happens when you spin the compost barrel. The compost needs to remain moist which can be done by sprinkling it with water. In my case water wasn't needed because there was plenty of liquid from the coffee grounds. The end goal is to produce a rich dark crumbly soil with particles that are uniform in size.

I spoke to Murat, the Director at Chartwell's, and it turned out that he was tracking his scraps as required by the corporation, for a program that they call Trim Trax, and then tossing them in the trash because no one needed them. Murat already had a basic system in place and the receptacles to store the scraps. I spoke to Jeff and Paula in Hospitality to set up a collection system, I purchased 3 gallon compostable garbage bags, which would be used to line a lidded soup pot for storage. The scraps would be collected and stored in the refrigerator until they could be picked up. I spoke to Theresa in Horticulture who showed me the composting barrel and how to use it. The barrel should be turned every day which was an unrealistic chore for me to do. Theresa had her class turn the barrel for me.

We all agreed that we would compost only vegetables, fruit, coffee grounds and egg shells. Every Friday I went to Chartwell's and the Hospitality kitchen to gather the scraps in 5 gallon buckets. The first week I purchased and used one 5 gallon bucket. I was expecting to collect one 5 gallon bucket each week. The second week I showed up with my bucket only to find that I had two buckets full, so I purchased another 5 gallon bucket. I realized that there was a learning curve for the people who were generating the scraps. It takes a while to get into the habit of saving and storing the scraps. By week five I had to purchase another 5 gallon bucket. From that point on I collected 15 gallons of scraps a week. In all I collected 147 gallons of scraps from Chartwell's and approximately 40 gallons of scraps from the Hospitality kitchen.

This project began in January which of course is a cold time of year. By the end of February it began to look like I would fill the composting barrel to its maximum. I made back up plans with the grounds staff to begin to use the compost pile located behind the Parkland playing fields. Of course, once

those plans were in place, the weather started to warm and the scraps started to decompose. I never needed to use the compost pile. As I stated above, I didn't need to water my compost because the coffee grounds had so much liquid; in fact, too much liquid. The liquid was dripping out of the barrel so Theresa put some containers underneath to collect the liquid. That liquid can be used to brew compost tea which can be used to help control disease and increase the nutrients available for the plant.

It is important to me to keep this project going after I leave Parkland. I give a scholarship to the Hospitality program and I have new requirements in place for students to receive it. I will give a \$500 per semester to the student who will handle this project. The student will be able to use the project to complete an A with honors project. I will require the student to get a weekly signature from the Director at Chartwell's so that I have documentation that the student followed through with project for the entire semester.





