



Back to Its Roots

A new company takes composting at home to the next level.

BY ALEXANDRA PECCI

Composting, like life, requires symbiotic relationships. It takes a healthy community of microorganisms to form networks, work together, and exchange nutrients to survive and create new life.

For Sebastian Brown, it's a concept that feels familiar and true because he's heard it all before—not in the world of composting, but

in his work in community building.

"That's the only way soil is healthy: having that environment where the web of relationships can thrive," says Brown, who's the founder and owner of the Lawrence-based curbside compost collection company Roots Compost. "It's all the same language as community building...I think it's super

Founder and owner of Roots Compost Sebastian Brown carries the compost buckets, which can go right on the curb for weekly pickup.

connected to how, in communities, it's not just about how people are doing individually."

Brown, who runs Roots Compost with his fiancé, Mary Jeanne Harwood, started the company as a pilot in the summer of 2015. He was intrigued by the idea of building connection and community outside the nonprofit sector, and had learned a lot from his work in Maryland helping a group of women who had emigrated from Central America start the El Rosal Sewing Collective.

"Doing that exposed me to the power of enterprise and social enterprise," he says, noting that business is often more empowering than the "one-way relationship" of nonprofits.

The idea behind Roots Compost is simple: making it easy for people—even busy city dwellers—to compost their food waste, which, according to the USDA, is estimated to be where 30 and 40 percent of the U.S. food supply ends up.

Instead of putting their food waste in trash bags bound for landfills, Roots Compost customers

put it in 5-gallon buckets that are lined with a biodegradable bag and covered with an airtight lid. The compost buckets can go right on the curb for weekly pickup. Roots cleans the bins and replaces the bags, making the composting process easy and seamless and removing any “yuck factor,” Brown says.

Andover resident Selen Aktar has been a Roots customer for several months. She was already composting at home, but could only put vegetable scraps into her home compost pile. With Roots, she can compost everything, including meat, bones, and compostable plates and cutlery.

“This is so much simpler and easier for me,” she says.

In addition, it’s drastically reduced the amount of trash her family produces.

“Since Roots, I actually take out my trash to the curbside maybe once a month,” she says. She was also able to have a total zero-waste birthday party for her children.

Roots Compost customers’ food waste eventually ends up at Brick Ends Farm in Hamilton, which turns it into “high-grade organic compost,” according to the farm’s CEO, James Gist.

“I love to see people like that trying to get in a business where there is no business,” Gist says of Roots Compost. Like Brown, Gist is passionate about composting, which is part of a virtuous circle of creating new soil and feeding farms, rather than contributing more trash to landfills.

“What we’re trying to do is educate people so they can utilize the food waste instead of just throw it away,” Gist says. His farm’s clients include everyone from curbside compost companies like Roots to larger institutions like Philips An-



dover, Harvard University, Whole Foods Market, and Hannaford supermarkets.

As of early summer, the Roots Compost service is available in North Andover, Haverhill, Methuen, Lawrence, and Andover. They also work with businesses and events by request. The service is priced very competitively to make it accessible to a larger number of people.

“I think a lot of times there’s an



Brown delivers food waste to Brick Ends Farm in Hamilton (above), which turns it into “high-grade organic compost.” Left, Brick Ends Farm CEO James Gist.

assumption that sustainability and living a more sustainable lifestyle is something that only wealthy people, people of privilege, can do,” Brown says.

And in true community-building fashion, Roots Compost wants its customers to feel like they’re part of something bigger than themselves. Not only do customers have the option to receive a free bag of compost a few times per year (“It’s a chance to see what they helped make,” Brown says), but the company is also partnering with Mi Casita, a local business founded by Fran Acosta that’s building affordable small homes in Lawrence, to revitalize a vacant lot as a community composting site downtown.

“How can we make composting something be visible and accessible to everybody?” Brown asks.

It all comes back to creating a local, sustainable economy that connects and benefits everyone in the community.

“The good life comes out of being connected to nature and each other, and Roots wants to help contribute to that,” Brown says. **n|s**

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