



Black Dirt Farm

**community-scale
food scrap haulers
and processors**

**retailers of
vermicompost
and compost products,
eggs, chickens,
and veggies**

A CASE STUDY

PRESENTED BY



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about Black Dirt Farm



TOM GILBERT, OWNER & OPERATOR

Black Dirt Farm (BDF) is a diversified family farm in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.

BDF collects food scraps from their community, forages hens, and makes compost and worm castings with the excess food and manure, with the purpose of nourishing their soils and crops. The farm is firmly based in regenerative agricultural practices and the creation of sustainable food systems. They are vigilant about keeping pressure on legislation surrounding food security, and staying alert to potential threats that may oppress Vermont's resilient, regenerative systems. Tom is passionate about educating those who care to know more about how they can make this planet happy to hold us all.

THE STORY

Black Dirt's diversified farm is firmly based on regenerative agricultural practices and the creation of sustainable food systems. Tom has worked throughout the state of Vermont to help others realize the need for a resilient, and social just food system. Over time, Tom realized how composting, and creating resilient soils aids in this work.

For example, waste facilities and landfills are often sited within low-income, non-white communities, which has potential health and property value implications. Tom advocates the need to change the way that our waste streams are managed, to make them more accountable and environmentally sound.

When first getting into his community-scale food rescue and composting business, Tom used a mix of personal investments, loans, and grants. He was able to structure his intensely vertically integrated business model so that input and start up costs were lower than normal. Using regenerative and resourceful practices, the equipment and core things that Tom and his staff use are assembled and tailored for their purposes; all of the operational equipment is unique to what they do and their design-build capacity.

For food scraps hauling equipment, a Ford 550 with a 10-yard dump trailer with a hydraulic tipper is used. There is an on-board washing system; every tote gets thoroughly washed so that no liners are needed. They also have a drop off location on site for local community members who want to bring their scraps directly to the farm. 98% of hauling scraps comes from container pick ups. Additionally they have 48 wheelbase totes

community engagement



Tom was established and reputable in his community already, and saw the opportunity to enact positive change. He feels as though he stepped into a market that was waiting for an executor; therefore, marketing and advertising were rarely needed. Door-to-door sales flyers were distributed on occasion. The need for food scrap collectors already existed; more people wanted to compost because they felt it directly connected to the betterment of their community.

Black Dirt Farm does not have target customers or markets in their overall mission. Transforming the local food system in a manner that is all-inclusive is their ultimate goal. Their current customer base consists of about 100 commercial businesses, and 400 residents for drop-off collection points. Hannaford and larger stores are the biggest source of food scrap collection.

Out of all of the food scraps collected, 65% come back to the farm, and the other 35% is delivered to two other facilities: Lamoille Soil and Tamerlier Farms. Once food scraps are hauled back to the farm, they are then combined into a compost blend and delivered to the laying hens. The laying hens provide plenty of nitrogen in the form of poop as they work the soil with their feet, as well as the egg sales that make them dually valuable to the overall operation. Most of what the hens don't eat, then gets put into windrows to make compost and a small amount is fed to worms to make castings.

The majority of the finished compost is sold to local vegetable and cannabis growers within a 30 mile radius. The market for worm castings is for house plant lovers, cannabis (home/commercial) growers, and an increasing number of veggie growers.

challenges



- Labor costs and aligning social mission with fair wages
- Commodities like eggs can be hard to price
- Create a mindset where food scraps-to-compost is valued

outcomes

- 550k - *annual total sales*
- 350k - *pounds of composted food scraps*
- 150k - *pounds of food scraps for the hens*
- 50k - *pounds of finished compost*
- 40k - *pounds of castings*
- 0-100k - *pounds of harvested crops*



future growth

- increase food waste collection by 30%
- increase the amount of compost produced by 30%
- increase the amount of castings produced by 400-800%
- increase flock and egg production
- expand compost blends for lawns and gardens

recommendations



- Research what debt looks like and how is it structured. Consider the financing; who's doing it and how they're doing it. Be aware of predatory lending.
- Be aware of payback periods for land and physical improvements (7-10 years) are greater vs. heavy equipment (2-5 years).
- Take advantage of grants with no payback required.
- Utilize consultants for marketing, etc.
- Build a peer-to-peer network so you can learn by doing. Networking is a very important informal system. The amount of knowledge shared in a community is a goldmine!

If you're feeling stuck, philosophically look at who's doing it a little bit bigger than you. Look at where you want to evolve into over 2-5 years and work towards that, instead of trying to evolve out of where you currently are.

Tom Gilbert
Owner/Operator



suggested resources

- [Vermont Organics Recycling Summit](#)
- [Webinars \(e.g. ILSR Composting Association of VT, American Pasture/Poultry Producers Association, Bio-cycle\)](#)
- [Maine Compost School](#)
- [The 131° School of Composting](#)
- [State of Vermont Agency of Agriculture - Business Planning Resources](#)