

# Case Study:

## Marketing On-Farm Compost

The Northeast Recycling Council (NERC) is a non-profit organization that conducts research, hands-on projects, training, and outreach on issues associated with source reduction, recycling, composting, environmentally preferable purchasing, and decreasing the toxicity of the solid waste stream.

Integrating composting practices into farming operations and refining compost production and utilization methods can help farmers better manage farm organic waste, including manure and crop residues. The resulting compost can be applied for on-farm soil benefits and/or sold as a valued-added product. To expand and support farm-based compost markets in the Northeast, NERC was awarded a grant from the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. Resources developed by NERC for the project, as well as presentations from seven compost marketing workshops, are posted on NERC's website. NERC provided technical assistance to farm compost operations, including development of operation-specific marketing plans.

### ***Collins Powder Hill Farm*** **Enfield, Connecticut**

#### **Overview**

For more than 130 years, the Collins family has been working the land on their 180-acre farm in Enfield, Connecticut. Now in its fifth generation, the primary focus of the Collins Powder Hill Farm is dairy and compost. Its dairy operation consists of raising and milking approximately 75 Holstein and Jersey cows. Collins family members show some of their Registered Holsteins on a local, state, regional, and occasionally, a national level. Corn and hay are grown on the farm to support the operation and the cows are pastured from late spring through the fall.

[Collins Compost](#) was started in 1992, as a way to help diversify the dairy operation and manage the farm's manure as a potential source of revenue. Also in 1992, the family sold the farm's development rights to the state of Connecticut through its Farmland Preservation Program. This ensures that the land will always be available for agriculture despite growing development pressures throughout Connecticut.

In 1997, farm operators continued their diversification efforts with the addition of the Collins Creamery, enjoyed by local residents for its homemade ice cream served in a country setting. The farm also opens its doors to the surrounding community in an effort to promote agricultural awareness. For some 40 years, people from all backgrounds have come to Collins Powder Hill Farm to participate in the Merry Mooers, a 4-H dairy club. Farm tours to school and community groups of all ages are also offered.





Collins Compost is advertised as an all-natural product which promotes a sustainable environment by reducing and recycling unnecessary waste into a valuable soil amendment. Their motto is “Whether you're a farmer, a home gardener, or a commercial landscaper, Collins Compost will bring your soil back to life!” Collins Compost is produced in compliance with the National Organic Standards.

The farm operators and owners run the compost business as an integrated facet of the overall farm business operation.

### **Materials Composted**

Collins Compost begins every autumn with the arrival of thousands of cubic yards of leaves from the Town of Enfield. Cow manure from the farm is then added to the large leaf piles in an appropriate carbon to nitrogen ratio for producing compost.

### **Compost Method and Equipment**

Leaves are delivered to the farm from the Town of Enfield and formed into piles. Manure from the farm is mixed into the leaf piles and formed into managed windrows (elongated piles) using a front loader. Windrow temperatures are monitored and recorded daily during the active compost phase. Windrowed materials are turned regularly using a windrow turner to facilitate the breakdown of the raw ingredients into compost. After the materials have completed the active composting phase, the compost is cured and then analyzed for pH, organic matter, and nutrient levels.



The process is complete after the compost is run through a trommel screener to create a consistent, finished product. The finished product is stored in a covered building. Collins Compost is sold by bulk and also bagged. The screener and bagging equipment is owned by Collins Compost.

Quality is assured through ongoing monitoring of feedstocks and knowing that the manure used in the process comes from the Collins Powder Hill Farm. The entire composting process is also carefully monitored at all steps and testing is done on each batch. Collins Compost is certified by [Baystate Organic Certifiers](#) for use in organic production.

### **Marketing**

In 2009, the farm operators designed an attractive [website](#) to focus attention on its compost product. The website describes the Collins family farm and other farm products. It promotes the benefits of Collins Compost, what it means for the compost to be certified for organic use, and recommended applications for Collins Compost. The website effectively uses brand identification while describing the important benefits of compost as a soil amendment.





A Collins Compost brochure is also available for download on the website. Collins Compost has a [Facebook page](#), started in February 2011, and posts are made regularly with a good use of pictures, product promotions, compost uses, organic gardening tips, events, and more.

Strategies used to develop the farm's marketing capacity include:

- Designing a compost operation that:
  - Meets on-farm manure management needs and farm business diversification efforts through sales of compost product
  - Provides for extra feedstock capacity to allow for potential revenue generation through acceptance of off-site feedstocks
- Researching compost marketing techniques:
  - Attending a NERC compost marketing workshop
  - Developing a compost marketing plan
- Obtaining certification from Baystate Organics to sell compost approved for use by organic growers in order to expand its potential market to organic agriculture
- Using attractive labeling and simple packaging to hold down costs and meet customer needs
  - Providing appropriate information on the compost packaging label – benefits, material analysis, use, etc.
- Use of “word-of-mouth” among farm dairy customers and the local community
- Utilizing local retail outlets for marketing and sales
- Using “companion marketing” with sales of built raised beds to promote use of Collins Compost for incorporation in raised bed soil mix



### **Compost Utilization, Customer Base, and Sales**

Collins Compost is sold by bulk and in bags direct from the farm and in retail stores around the region. In addition, finished compost is used onsite for crop fields. Bulk compost product is sold for \$30 a cubic yard, with a 1/2 yard minimum per order, and is available for pick-up at the farm. The farm operators will load the compost into trucks. Bagged compost is sold in 40 pound bags available for \$7 each at Powder Hill Farm store.

Delivery service for bulk or bag orders is provided. Farm trucks can carry up to 5 cubic yards. For larger orders, trucking companies are contracted. Collins Compost recently extended its sales by adding several new retail locations for bagged Collins Compost product.



Collins Compost is marketed to homeowners and gardeners to meet their home and garden soil supplement needs. Bagged compost is promoted as ideal for patio gardens and other small spaces, with bulk compost supplied for larger projects. The product is also promoted for use on organic farms. Agricultural sales are also tailored toward the area's tobacco growers.

Collins Compost partners with a carpentry business to sell raised garden beds. Promoted as “the perfect companion to Collins Compost”—raised beds are



excellent for gardening in small spaces or in areas with poor soil.

### **Challenges and Solutions**

**Challenge:** Increased marketing is required to convince organic growers to use Collins Compost and to pay a premium price for the product.

**Solution:** Being certified for organic use is important to the Collins Family and their farm operation. As a long-term marketing strategy, the benefits and quality of its premium compost is promoted to a diversity of potential customers, including organic growers.

### **Future Plans**

Collins Compost has successfully worked as a manure management option for the farm and as a way for the farm to be more sustainable by diversifying its operations. To obtain what it believes to be the highest quality product for the farm and for its customers, Collins Compost is certified for use for use by organic growers.

The operation was planned and designed with excess capacity and is well positioned for expansion. Collins Compost has the potential to increase revenues by accepting off-farm feedstocks for tip fees and to increase compost production. The compost operation has significant room to expand its footprint, without concern from neighbors or potential water issues.

Additional goals include:

- Short-to-mid-term goal is to increase production from 2,500 cubic yards each year to 5,000 cubic yards per year
- Expand the bagging operation and increase retail bag sales, especially focusing on development of more winter market sales

### **For More Information**

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