

WSU News

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Khristin Nguyen, a member of the Chartwells kitchen crew, dumps food waste into a composting bin in Shocker Hall. Wichita State, Chartwells and Nudge Compost are working together to reduce food waste on campus.

Shocker Hall goes green with composting program

By Sara Ornelas, Marketing Content Strategist

There's a whole world living inside your food waste — billions and billions of microorganisms — just waiting to make your landscaping bloom brighter and your vegetables grow heartier.

Now Wichita State University is a part of that agricultural miracle thanks to a collaboration among the university, Chartwells catering and [Nudge Compost](#).

Starting this spring, Shocker Hall food waste that was previously being thrown away is instead now being collected and composted, and will soon be recycled as compost to feed the university's signature tulips, which are planted throughout campus.

"There are more living organisms in a handful of compost than there are people on earth," said Jesse Marks, owner of Nudge and a WSU alum who graduated in 2018 with a master's degree in public administration. "It's so low-tech. It's kind of how nature is supposed to work. In a landfill, it rots and releases methane, which causes all kinds of problems. The compost process allows it to break down in a more natural way."

For this semester, Shocker Hall is sending its fruit and vegetable waste to Nudge, but there are plans to add grains and meats in the fall, said Jamie Kraisinger, director of operations for Chartwells, a full-service food provider that handles the contractual food services on campus. Kraisinger said the composting program will also extend to the Rhatigan Student Center at that time.

"We wanted to make sure we didn't overwhelm Nudge because we are the largest scale of composting that Jesse handles at this point," Kraisinger said. "We're trying to do it in phases to make sure that everyone can sustain and do it properly."

Marks estimates that he picks up roughly 2,000 pounds of food waste from Shocker Hall per week, and Kraisinger said that the process has been completely painless.

"It was as simple as not taking it to the trash," she said. "We joked that we went from throwing things in the trash to throwing things in the bin. Jesse picks it up. We don't even see him. We're doing a great thing without even really changing any of our habits."

Food for thought

Marks' entrepreneurial journey into the world of composting started when he was in graduate school at Wichita State.

"In my last semester, I focused on food issues generally," he said. "I saw that other cities were doing composting like that, and I thought Wichita was big enough and forward-thinking enough to do this."

Through Nudge, Marks hopes to spur people to think about what they eat and the lifecycle of our food.

“My approach was to get people started on a solution and get them thinking that ‘I can buy less’ or ‘I can eat cleaner.’ It’s kind of an entry into some of these food issues on a larger scale,” he said.

Marks also sees composting as a stepping stone on the pathway for Wichita to attract a younger population and show that we’re a progressive community.

“Wichita has a huge opportunity to rebrand itself away from being a flyover city and show that we’re vibrant, forward-thinking and we’re doing things to attract young people. We have an opportunity to lead on this,” he said. “I wanted Wichita State to be a leader of the composting movement because I have that connection to the university.”

Breaking it down

Once the food waste leaves Shocker Hall, Marks takes it to Wichita Dirt Company to start breaking it down into compost, which takes anywhere from two weeks to two years, depending on the materials used.

After the food’s transformation is complete, Nudge offers the finished compost to its customers during seasonal give-back events. From there, it goes to gardens and farms across the Wichita area, acting as a kind of superfood for the growing flora.

“It turns into this valuable resource that should exist anyway. The particles that are breaking down in there – not only does it have all the nutrients and microorganisms, but those things hold water.”

Compost’s water conservation capabilities are another environmental benefit.

“Regular dirt doesn’t have any water-holding properties. So, you can reduce the amount of water that your garden or a farm will need significantly by using compost,” Marks said. “The amount of water that we use to produce the food we eat is mind-blowing. Once we’ve done that to just throw our waste into a landfill is really frustrating.”

WSU’s green journey

Marks and Wichita State are dedicated to expanding the university’s composting footprint, which he hopes will eventually include partners on WSU's Innovation Campus.

Chartwells, Kraisinger said, has its own sustainability initiative, and her work with Nudge aligns nicely with that.

“It’s been a great partnership so far,” she said, “and we’re really excited about taking it to a new level next semester.” 🍌