

At Earth Care Farm Composting is a Family Affair

By Frank Carini / ecoRI News staff

April 26, 2017

Mike Merner, right, began growing rhubarb on Earth Care Farm in 1977. He started with two plants given to him by a friend. Now, there are rows of rhubarb and it takes a family to harvest all of it. (Jayne Merner Senecal)

CHARLESTOWN, R.I. — Jayne Merner Senecal returned to the hive last July, although, truth be told, she never truly left. After all, she's a farmer's daughter. She grew up on Earth Care Farm.

The renowned farm and her well-respected Dad spent two-plus decades teaching her farming, animal husbandry and, most of all, the secrets of composting. Senecal left in 2002 to focus her efforts on her fine-gardening business. Like her, her own business, [Golden Root Gardening](#), grew up on Country Drive, as it was born as a small organic farm in one of Earth Care Farm's fields.

"I was always involved in the operation," said Senecal, now 36. "I've driven every machine. I've worked sales. I've turned compost."

She returned full time to her childhood home/classroom with her husband, Ryan, and their 9-year-old son, Cooper. Senecal is focused on continuing the family's long tradition of farming, which her father, Mike, and mother, Betty, started four decades ago. She's getting plenty of help from her sister, brother, aunt, uncle, nieces and nephews, and the five employees she couldn't stop praising during a recent visit from ecoRI News.

"Everyone helps out. We always have," she said. "It's a family affair."

Much of the time and effort on the farm is spent creating compost. The operation annually takes in about 10,000 cubic yards of organic matter otherwise destined for the landfill. That material makes about 4,000 cubic yards of nutrient-rich compost.

For 40 years, Mike Merner has played the role of an organic alchemist, making a living for himself and his family turning stable and zoo manure, wood chips, leaves, straw shavings, seaweed, coffee grounds and food scrap into soil. Into life.

The state's unofficial composting guru is known to leave meetings carrying a teabag wrapped in a napkin. For a man who understands and appreciates the benefit of organic matter, he finds it frustrating when this valuable material is wasted.

Rhode Island has been slow to embrace the benefits of composting. The state's new composting regulations are weak and ignore the importance of improved soil fertility that is a result of traditional compost operations such as Earth Care Farm's. Composting also creates a healthy habitat for microorganisms, and increases drainage, aeration and water holding capacity of soil — all factors that help the environment better withstand weather extremes and disease.

Compost: The next generation

At age 67, Earth Care Farm's elder statesman has taken a step back from the operation's daily grind. Farming doesn't allow you to age easily. On the recent day ecoRI News visited, Merner was driving a red tractor and working to make sure stormwater properly flowed from the composting area to the farm's retention pond.

"Dad still does what he wants to do, and he's always here for advice," Senecal said. "The foundation he created and what he has done here is cool. We're creating a quality product, not managing waste."

The farm's employees and Senecal meet weekly with the composting guru, to strategize and listen. Senecal hopes to keep the farm running smoothly, and she has added a few new wrinkles, such as [gardening classes](#) and regularly hosting students to help with planting and harvesting.

[Earth Care Farm](#) has partnered with Warren-based [The Compost Plant](#) to make and sell bagged compost that bears the name "Rhody Gold." Gone are the days when two farm employees or, more likely, two Merner family members, bagged the product by hand. The Compost Plant has a hopper that makes the task slightly less daunting. Rhody Gold is also sold wholesale.

To make the 27-acre farm — the composting operation uses 3 acres — more energy efficient, Senecal is having a ground-mounted solar system installed in June. The solar panels will be in a field fenced off from the farm's cows, and the system is expected to provide much of the property's power.

The farm also recently invested in a hybrid compost screener, which the new solar system will eventually help power. The operation is also experimenting with creating a compost tea and an efficient means to apply it. Earth Care Farm has partnered in a pilot program with a Rhode Island turf farm, which will treat its product with compost tea rather than chemicals.

To make curbside composting a reality statewide and backyard composting an accepted practice, Senecal said society needs to change its collective mindset.

"We're disconnected from nature, and we misunderstand the value of stuff, resources and materials," she said. "We think of the stuff as trash. But it's not waste."

She said three to four composting operations similar to Earth Care Farm could handle a Rhode Island curbside composting program.

"It's not rocket science," Senecal said. "We just need to change our attitude."

