

Dirt Hugger wins Nucor Steel Recycler of the Year Award

At the Washington State Recycling Association's virtual annual conference this week, Dirt Hugger, based in Dallesport, accepted the Recycler of the Year award.

The nomination was due, in part, to the successful roll out and implementation of the City of Vancouver's curb-side food waste with yard debris composting program, according to co-founder Pierce Louis in a press release.

The program provided more than 17,000 tons of organic materials (over 680 semi-truck loads), which Dirt Hugger processed at their facility in Dallesport. Dirt Hugger has turned the material into more than 40,000 cubic yards of organic compost, which has been sold to local orchards, vineyards, farms, and gardens throughout the Columbia Gorge.

Louis cited five major business changes in the past year. Highlights include:

- Six new team members, expanding the roster to 22 Dirt Hugger employees.
- A recovered, reusable, and returnable bucket system for selling packaged compost product, which displaces plastic bagged compost.
- Facility expansion and upgrades at the Port of Klickitat location, including negative aeration with biofiltration.
- New, end-to-end orchard and vineyard compost application services.
- New orchard debris shredding services, which offsets local orchard burning.

"Dirt Hugger welcomes the challenge of processing organic materials for the Columbia Gorge and beyond. Composting helps keep methane-generating food scraps out of the landfill and return their nutrients to the soil," Louis said.

Founded in 2010, Dirt Hugger produces 40,000 cubic yards of compost per year by recycling organic matter from food scraps, brush, brewery waste, culled fruit and fish. Their compost is used by conventional and organic growers (OMRI listed). They distribute to farms in the Columbia River Gorge, Willamette Valley and Tri-Cities regions.

Dirthuggers digs deep

Last month, Dirthugger turned product that started in Vancouver back into community service in that Clark County city.

Builders have gathered and garden boxes have been built around a local church to solve a food shortage in Vancouver's Maplewood neighborhood. Volunteers are filling raised bed boxes and continuing the process of covering the green grass with layers of cardboard and leaves so grass will decompose naturally over the winter and pathways can be chipped.

"Dirt Hugger is honored to support this community garden effort. It reflects our values. We want to give back to the communities that support us," said Nate Fleming, a spokesperson for Dirt Hugger. "If we can close the organics recycling loop by supplying a compost soil blend to grow healthy food for those who need it most, then our mission is being fulfilled.

"When Ellen Ives with Waste Connections inquired about Dirt Hugger supplying

compost for this project, I knew our Ready to Grow soil blend was the ideal material," said Fleming. "We developed this product specifically as our raised bed mix — it provides soil nutrients, beneficial biology from the compost, and light fluffy texture for root development. All of these make for robust plant growth and, in turn, healthy food."

A problem in this neighborhood is "food insecurity," according to a press release. Many of its working class families struggle to put healthy, fresh foods on the table.

As a result, a disproportionate number of students at nearby schools qualify for free and reduced lunch programs — the highest percentage of any schools in their district.

"This is a high poverty area. Families here have few options for buying healthy food that's affordable, so I'd say we're in a 'food desert,'" said Kitty Hibbs, Green Team co-leader of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver. "Fresh produce is not readily available at the food banks. Other community gardens in Vancouver charge a fee and are far away."

The plan started coming together in October. It calls for two long rows of raised beds and a small shed for equipment inside a fenced area a little larger than a tennis court on the church's property. It's a big job, but it's taking shape fast, thanks to community support, said a press release.

Partnerships took care of the required lumber and irrigation, but until recently project co-leaders had struggled to find soil to fill all the planned garden beds that would be rich enough to produce high yield crops.

Fortunately Hibbs tapped into the area's burgeoning soil industry. She attended the virtual October Clark County Green Business meeting and described their community garden project to the group. Waste Connection's environmental educator Ellen Ives connected her with Dirt Hugger, which turns Clark County food waste from businesses, city residents, and schools into organic soil.

"Clark County schools have been sorting food waste to be composted for years now. Through Waste Connections and Clark County Green Schools we educate students and staff so that they understand the environmental benefit of composting food scraps. Composting preserves nutrients and reduces landfill greenhouse gases that cause climate change,"



said Ives. "The compost and soil mixtures Dirt Hugger produces are organic and of high quality. The people there are very community oriented and they were happy to donate their soil mix for a community garden that will benefit people in need."

"Dirt Hugger will fill the beds with another critical piece, the soil," said Teigen. "Volunteers will do the physical work and our five community partners will provide the gardeners whose families need what the garden and Mother Nature can create."

Dirt Hugger donated enough of their Ready to Grow mix to fill the project's 25 raised beds, and Dietrich Trucking agreed to donate the transport and delivery.

Once the soil is delivered, Laura Lindeman and Brandy O'Shea of the Maplewood Neighborhood Association will start connecting families to garden plots so they can begin planting seeds this spring. That will take this project from conception to reality in less than five months.

"We aren't surprised to see people in the community stepping up to help, it's something we see every day in this association. But it is really impressive to see something at this scale come together so quickly," said O'Shea. "We can't wait to get our hands dirty in the garden."

Above, Dirt Hugger crew members stand atop a mountain of compost at their Dallesport area facility, also pictured at right. Below, Volunteers with the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver's Green Team are building a community garden to help alleviate the food desert in Vancouver. Contributed photos and David Ives photo



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