

WasteNot Workshop Promotes Compost Production

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Jason Budsan leads a demonstration at a composting workshop on Saturday on St. John. (Photo by Judi Shimel)

Increasing food security while trimming the waste stream in the Virgin Islands were the dual goals of a composting workshop held Saturday on St. John. About 20 residents filled the seats at Giffit Hill School for a demonstration led by St. Thomas artisan Jason Budsan.

Organizers from the Agriculture Department and the nonprofit Island Green Living say both goals can be advanced through composting. It's estimated that 35 percent of a typical household's trash in the Virgin Islands is made up of organic material, said conservation coordinator Gracie Lettsome.

When those items are dropped into a waste bin, they become part of the territory's solid waste stream. But Island Green President Harith Wickrema said using those materials to make compost turns them into a useful commodity.

Organics like food waste, yard trimmings, and used paper products can be repurposed, although all are not suitable for composting, Budsan said. When mixed in the proper proportions and allowed to decompose, they produce enriched soil that's suitable for planting.

Or at least mixing with the soil found in a home garden, Budsan said. In the demonstration room sat bins and burlap bags with small branches, tiny twigs, dried leaves, charcoal, some fruit past its prime, and a bag of earthworms.

There was also an introduction to the Johnson-Su bioreactor, a fancy name for a layered mesh wire drum covered with repurposed trash bags. The advantage of using this method, Budsan said, is eliminating the need to stir the compost in order to make sure the mix gets enough oxygen.

Then, Budsan's artisanal side appeared with a smile. After loading the bioreactor with layers of organics, composters have to get to know their mix. Adding worms — vermiculture — helps the compost while providing a good home for the worms.

"It's all about making that lasagna," he said.

At the bottom of the drum lies the end product. Attendees are invited to dig in using grow bags provided by the organizers. Mary Ladner eagerly scoops it up.



Mary Ladner loads up on freshly made compost at the Giff Hill workshop Saturday on St. John. (Photo by Judi Shimel)

Ladner said she once lived full-time on St. John but now lives there seasonally. “I’ve started a little garden here and by the time I leave, it should be producing some vegetables that I can give to my neighbor,” Ladner said.

Wickrema said the compost project’s goal is to have every student take home a bag of compost and start a home garden, even if it consists of one crop. “This is a promotion to recycle food waste. That is our goal,” he said.

And while a handful of Saturday’s participants said they are engaged in home gardening, Wickrema said those who simply want to master composting can play a role by networking with others to share their results.

“As a nonprofit, there is only so much we can do without the community’s help,” he said.

The theme of Saturday’s workshop was “Grow USVI’s Food Sovereignty While Growing Your Garden.” A previous session was held at center court in Tutu Park Mall, Lettsome said. The next workshop is scheduled for Feb. 4 at the St. Croix Agricultural Fair Grounds in Estate Lower Love.