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UC Merced turns food waste into 'green' waste

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Eat corn with corn. Then store the leftovers in corn. Sound silly? It's actually as practical as disposable flatware.

UC Merced is taking its vaunted "green" practices a culinary step forward. This time, sustainability efforts are headed toward the kitchen.

Biodegradable corn-made utensils and leftover containers, plus a new composting program, are new methods the campus' dining services have deployed to divert waste from landfills.

All "post-consumer waste," or food waste that hasn't yet touched a person's plate, goes into green bins just outside the campus' Yablokoff-Wallace Dining Center.

Jason Souza, general manager of UC Merced's dining services, flipped open one of these bins to display a colorful, pungent heap of old tomatoes, onion peels, egg shells and vegetables. "It ain't pretty," he understated.

This compostable waste is carried to an area on campus away from classrooms and housing. It's dropped into a small mound and mixed with carbon-based materials, such as hay or straw, to help it degrade.

It will take about three to four months to break down, said Emily DeCremer, a UC Merced junior and student recycling coordinator. The compost can then be used in an herb garden the university is hoping to develop, or be dispersed on flower beds and landscaping on campus.

The program has collected 424 pounds during its first month, she said. The compost waste sits in a modest heap about a foot high.

Biodegradable utensils and containers won't go to this composting project. But they will break down quicker in a landfill than their plastic equivalents, Souza said.

The flatware is made from corn -- its starch converted into a polymer to mimic plastic, said Aseem Das, founder and executive director of World Centric, the Palo Alto nonprofit that supplies these

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items.

They used to be made of potatoes -- referred to as "SpudWare," he said. But the manufacturer decided to switch to corn.

The clear containers, known as "bioplastic," are also made of corn. They take about three to six months to decompose in a landfill. The much-thicker flatware takes six months to a year to break down.

They run about 5 cents each -- twice as expensive as traditional plastic flatware, Souza said.

But plastic flatware ranges in price, Das said. While his product is often more expensive than the cheaper plastic utensils, it can fall somewhere in the middle of the range. He quoted 2.4 to 4 cents a piece as the price.

Many schools are ordering these products, Das said: "It's natural that they want to educate their students about environmental awareness, sustainability."

UC Merced's dining services want 80 percent of their items to be biodegradable or compostable, Souza said. So far, about 70 percent meets this standard.

Ideas for the composting program started during a dinning expansion committee meeting. The dining expansion project will tack 900 square feet onto the existing facility, including more seating, eating space and storage.

During the course of planning, a committee member suggested adding an herb garden. From there, campus facilities and the recycling program began to set up a composting program to eventually feed that garden. "It's a way to complete the circle," Souza said. "Sustainability is important on campus, but we generate a lot of waste. It's a step in the right direction."

They hope to have the garden in place by the fall semester.

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