

West County Composting Clubs diverts 72,800 pounds of waste per year

by Janet Perry Special to Sonoma West | Posted: Wednesday, November 16, 2016 12:07 pm

Fifth graders at Apple Blossom School were treated to a workshop with Stefan Stehling of the Compost Club on Monday, Nov. 14. Oona Heacock of the North Coast Resource Conservation and Development Council (NCRC&DC), noted that it fell on the day before America Recycles Day, a presidential proclamation urging Americans to reduce their impact on the waste stream. The Compost Club's success in local schools has Sonoma County leading the way in supporting the cause.

Students at both Apple Blossom and Orchard View schools have been participating in a vermiculture composting project created by Rick Kaye, of Healdsburg, who founded the Compost Club. Kaye, farm manager for the biodynamic Puma Springs Vineyards, was inspired by subsistence farmers' success with composting while in Panama with the Peace Corps.

The Apple Blossom system was put in place by the Compost Club nearly 10 years ago and was refurbished by the club two years ago. Kaye was quick to praise the work of both Stehling and Orchard View teacher, Sunny Galbraith, who has been instrumental in the success of the project at both schools and honored as a 2015 Teacher of the Year by the Sebastopol Rotary Club for her work with these programs.

The Apple Blossom students started with a number of trash items and began pulling out what could be reused, removing recyclables and compostables. Stehling spoke to the students about the impact on waste stream and why small, local steps are important. Students formed small groups and debated over which items were recyclable and which ones were compostable.

Once the exercise was over, two students gave a demonstration of the steps for recyclables, compostables and foods appropriate for worm bins. Student Hailey Kirby said she enjoyed the



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Stefan Stehling, Kenji Fagundes, Sunny Galbraith, Oona Heacock and Hailey Kirby check out worms in the compost at a workshop with the Compost Club on Monday, Nov. 14. Students at both Apple Blossom and Orchard View Schools have been participating in a vermiculture composting project created by Rick Kaye, of Healdsburg,

experience. "I think it's helping nature," she said. "The worms help produce more of nature like the trees and flowers and things."

Stehling said that for some students, it's the interaction with nature that is most important and that the program engages the students in a different way than other studies.

"It might be the first time a student has touched a worm, or dug through soil," he said. "Just seeing the diversity of life and what's going on in the garden, it's really powerful."

Heacock said she is uplifted by the students' understanding of the importance of their own actions in saving their environment. She also enjoys watching the delight on children's faces when they see the worms. "They are the best little recyclers of them all," Heacock said.

Although the NCRC&DC assists programs running locally and is involved in the school's vermiculture composting program, it is also supported by Sonoma County Waste Management Agency and the Sunrise Rotary Club, as well as local donors.

In the program's first year, with just one school, the Compost Club helped to divert 900 pounds of waste. By 2014, with 20 sites, they were diverting 72,800 pounds from the waste stream. The schools are then able to sell compost, earning money for garden projects and other needs.

Kaye said he enjoys students stepping into places of leadership and finding success in their own way while working on helping the environment. With so many different students and experiences to choose from, he said he has a hard time knowing which one is most memorable.

"Maybe it was the fifth grade kid with the clipboard managing student volunteers, or the high school student I mentored that won an award for community service (environmental category), or the business graduate student interested in doing a masters thesis on campus-wide compost economics," Kaye said. "It could be the board member who joined us fresh out of college and now has 10 years' experience as a professional in waste recovery, or the millions of pounds of food scraps recycled over the last 14 years, meal by meal, effort by effort, case by case."