



green dreams

A Chicago entrepreneur with a passion for sustainability turned a backyard hobby into a zero-emissions compost collection service.

LIAM DONNELLY delivers black gold. That's shorthand for compost, a fertilizer made of decomposed organic matter (think produce scraps) prized by gardeners and farmers. In his seventh year as CEO of WasteNot Compost, Donnelly oversees this process on an industrial scale. His company collects 5-gallon buckets of food waste from homes and businesses in Chicagoland—including items that shouldn't go into a backyard compost pile, like meat scraps (ahem, rats)—and leaves clean pails to refill. After a sojourn at WasteNot's facility, the scraps become nutrient-rich, dirt-like compost, which is then returned to customers for their gardens. *Interview with Kelsey Schagemann.*

KS How did WasteNot Compost start?

LD As a teenager, I worked at a cafe where I was throwing out hundreds of pounds of coffee grounds each week. The manager cared about sustainability, so I asked if I could take the grounds home to compost. Eventually he started paying me to do that, and I expanded to other restaurants, using a bike trailer to haul the compost to a community garden. But I still viewed it as a hobby.

KS When did that change?

LD During my senior year of high school, my classmate Lauren Kaszuba saw a business expansion opportunity: residential composting. She agreed to do marketing, branding and social media, and we officially incorporated WasteNot Compost in 2015.

KS Why should people compost? And what is compostable?

LD Food waste in landfills creates methane, which contributes to climate change. It's the third-largest human contributor of methane in the U.S. after the oil and gas industry and agriculture. For composting, the general rule of thumb is that if it grows (or used to), it goes. We take everything from meat scraps to bones, solid dairy, baked goods, paper towels, napkins, pizza boxes, fruits, vegetables and more.

KS Where does it go next?

LD We have a 28,000-square-foot property where we sanitize the buckets and do the composting. It's not just throwing things into a big pile. There's a science to it. Composting is the controlled breakdown process of organic matter, and it's that controlled part that makes a big impact. As an industrial composter, we are providing a perfect environment for this breakdown to occur. We monitor nitrogen, carbon dioxide and oxygen levels; we check if things are getting too wet.

KS But it's not just about composting.

LD Exactly. My passion is sustainability in business. When we say zero emissions, we really do mean that. Our forklift is electric; we have a fleet of 23 electric vans. Composting is a tool to fight climate change, but it's also a way to get in front of people. What about your water usage? Where does your power come from? What kind of car do you drive? We've captured an audience, and our goal is to keep changing people's lives. wastenotcompost.com

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.