Accelerated composting system gets successful trial in Provincetown

October 31, 2014

By Lynda Sturner

PROVINCETOWN — One local business owner is leading the way at helping to make Provincetown more eco-friendly.

Turns out, Ben deRuyter, co-owner of Whaler's Wharf, the Aquarium Marketplace and the Art House, was the first person in New England to install a relatively new product called Ecovim, an onsite composting system to handle the food waste generated by the nine restaurants in his buildings. DeRuyter said it has been "an exciting experiment" that has indeed "proved itself out over the course of the summer."

The energy-efficient Ecovim speedily converts organic waste into reusable products. Kitchen and dining scraps go into the machine and, 18 hours later, come out as a highly concentrated dark soil suitable for use by farmers and landscapers.

In fact, this soil is so rich, they say, that it needs to be cut with other potting soil before it can be used — one part compost to six parts regular potting soil. The concentrated soil, a dark rich color, feels like finely ground coffee grinds.

DeRuyter takes the newly transformed soil and dumps it onto his sister and brother's Punkhorn Farm in Brewster where it's used to grow vegetables. "I'm taking waste from my tenants restaurants, running it through the Ecovim, bringing it home to grow the food that I bring back here and sell at Blondie's," he said.

DeRuyter learned about the Ecovim from Herb Montgomery and Mike Fitzgerald, who started Fitz-Mont, a new business focusing on environmentally friendly products and solutions. The three men work together in Brewster town government. "Herb knew about my businesses in Provincetown and introduced me to this composting system," said deRuyter. "The first questions I asked were, does it smell and is it loud?"

Interestingly, deRuyter said, not only is the composting machine completely odor-free and soundless, but because the product it generates is dry and sterile it doesn't attract rodents. He was able to place it outdoors in the courtyard of his downtown Provincetown buildings where he has six residential tenants.

“As the waste is being reduced, it purifies the liquid from the waste and that water can come out and go directly into the sewer and not cause any damage,” said Montgomery. “For every pound of refuse you put in you get approximately one gallon of water.”

Next year deRuyter plans on using the water byproduct to help irrigate his tenant’s gardens.

Ecovim was developed in South Korea 20 years ago. The U.S. government used it on their military bases during the Gulf and Iraq wars. Five months ago, Integrated Veterans Services, a veteran-owned company, acquired the rights as a dealer in the U.S.

The machine comes in six sizes ranging from 125-pound capacity for small businesses, up to a 3,300-pound capacity suitable for large resorts, universities and the military. For his businesses, DeRuyter chose a 250-pound-capacity machine for $2,988, which he financed with a low-interest business loan from Seamen’s Bank. It measures 45.3 inches wide, 39.5 inches deep and 41.3 inches high and, according to deRuyter, Montgomery and Fitzgerald, leaves no carbon footprint.

Further, it’s simple to operate, said Joe Goshen, deRuyter’s maintenance manager. “I collect the food wastes from the pails in the restaurants, dump it into the machine, close the machine, make sure the timer is on zero, press the start button and let it run for 18 hours,” he said.

DeRuyter, who came to Provincetown in 2000 to work in his father Paul deRuyter’s business while he was in graduate school, has an undergraduate degree in biochemistry and molecular biology and a graduate degree in business. “My father retired and I bought out his share in the business in 2007 and have been operating it ever since,” said deRuyter.

Massachusetts recently passed a law that went into effect Oct. 1 that bans large amounts of commercial food disposal at landfills and transfer stations. “It requires any entity that disposes of at least one ton of material per week to donate or repurpose the unusable food. Any remaining food waste will be shipped to an anaerobic digestion facility where it will be converted to clean energy or sent to composting and animal-feed operations,” said the state’s website.

DeRuyter was ahead of the game when he installed his machine in June. “The primary reason for me to put in this technology was for the benefit of the environment,” he said, but added, “I would be lying if I didn’t say I was hoping for and anticipating some amount of cost savings.”

Turns out, he managed both — he avoids the large transfer fees and, perhaps more importantly, reduces unwanted material in the waste stream by 85 percent. Goshen is suitably impressed with its success. “You throw the food in it, it grinds it up and becomes soil,” he said. “Basically it’s the coolest thing I’ve seen this summer.”