

The Walking Windrow (Follow-Along) Project



**** Welcome Guide ****

Dedication

The Walking Windrow Project is dedicated to my 81 year old (fall 2019) dad, Laird Christie. Without his ongoing support it absolutely, *positively* would NOT have been possible!

In the fall of 2017, I had the honor of being able to “rescue” him from some very challenging, scary circumstances, and ever since then he has just gone back to rescuing ME in even bigger, more amazing ways.



A prime example of this happened a few short weeks after the start of the Walking Windrow Project (early fall 2018). My trusty station wagon (aka “suburban worm farmer pick-up truck”) finally died on me for good. The timing couldn't have been *worse*, for many reasons, not the least of which was the fact that I needed to still get out to the project site and would have no way of doing so.

Without missing a beat, my dad stepped up and insisted I take his vehicle and keep it as long as I needed it.

That's just the kind of guy he is, and always has been – and I am literally overwhelmed with gratitude for everything he has done.

IMPORTANT: This guide is part of the Walking Windrow Follow-Along Package – please do not share it with anyone outside of our community. Thank-you!

Overview

Thank-you once again for your interest in (and support of) the Walking Windrow (Follow-Along) Project (WWP)! I'm excited about the possibility of sharing this project – and approach as a whole - with as many like-minded people as possible. I'll be the first to admit that things didn't end up going *quite* as planned (to say the least) – but I'm still very happy with the results, and am confident you will get a LOT of benefit from it.

This guide was created to make sure you are completely up to speed on the different member resources available to you and how to access them. It also contains quite a lot relevant background information relating to the project (more in-depth than info on Journal page), in case you want to learn more.

Getting Started

Hopefully by the time you read this you: **1)** are on the e-mail list and have received the welcome email (**NOTE:** newer customers will likely be on one of the Compost Guy “Ultimate” lists if you grabbed this as part of a product bundle), **2)** have received an email with your login information for the Compost Guy Course Portal – where the “Walking Windrow Journal” can be found, and **3)** have maybe even been invited to the private Facebook group (please get in touch if interested, just to make sure – we'll come back to this), and **4)** have downloaded the Summary/Video guide.

The two key “member areas” are the “Walking Windrow Journal” (inside the CG Portal) and the private Walking Windrow / Trench Vermicomposting Facebook group. Just so you know, this (FB) group was originally created exclusively for WWP members – but with my consolidation of multiple projects it will now become more of a general discussion group for serious vermicomposters.

Regarding the Summary/Video Guide – it was created to make it a lot easier for members to find all the original update videos (these were only posted in the FB group early on – I have now added compressed versions to the WWP Journal page as well). It's also a great way to get caught up with project activities so far (but I highly, *highly* recommend you take the time to go through the written and video updates when you have a chance).

Best Ways to Get in Touch – there are multiple ways to reach me if you need any assistance etc. You should be able to reply to any emails you receive from the email list. There is a member support page inside the Portal. You can also email me directly at vip@compostguy.com. Facebook is also a decent way to reach me (but a bit hit and miss at times) – be sure to send me a friend request here: [Compost Guy](#) - and then start a conversation (if you send a message *before* we are “friends” it more than likely won't see it since filed elsewhere). NOTE: That link will only work if you are already logged in to FB.

Also note that if you are using a pen name it is a good idea to e-mail me ahead of time since I do get spammy friend requests and often ignore them if I don't know who they are from.

Speaking of Facebook...

If You Absolutely, Positively REFUSE to Use Facebook – I know some people are not FB fans (to put it mildly) – and I myself have gone through a lot of love-hate cycles with the platform – so if you're feeling really resistant to get involved with that side of things, I get it. I do want to mention that this is what's known as a “secret” group – no one outside the group can even find it, let alone see what's being posted in there. Over the years (for other private groups) I have encouraged people to create pen-name (anonymous) accounts solely for the purpose of participating, and a fair number of people have gone that route. But the bottom-line is that I'm not going to push the issue – especially now that the videos are found in the main member's area as well.

OK, that's it for the preliminaries (for now)!

If you are curious to dive in a bit more deeply with the story behind how all this came about, the rationale behind the project design, and how things developed, feel free to keep reading!

The (Extended) Backstory

Back in the spring of this year (2018) I made what I thought was a firm decision to take the season off from my Canadian ("real world") vermicomposting business. My first love has always been (online) education, and the plan was to focus on new courses and other educational resources.

Long story short(*ish*), I launched a fundraiser project to help make it happen...it didn't pan out...and I realized I would need to get the worm business going after all

(meanwhile the prime spring selling period had passed me by already).

Initial feeling...*Uggggggh!!* (to put it mildly)

On a whim - and to help compensate for missed revenue - I decided to try something different - I placed an ad for gardening/composting services on a local online classified ads site. I wasn't optimistic it would lead to anything, but it also didn't cost more than a few minutes of my time - so I had nothing to lose.

Almost immediately things started to turn around...

I received a lot of responses to the ad (and was able to pick and choose the jobs I wanted).

I was also surprised to realize that I really loved the work! It felt great to get back out and interacting with customers - and there is just something special about hard day of manual work (especially when you receive money at the end of the day - haha).

Not long after the ball was rolling, I ended up connecting with the owner of a local riding stable (a mere 10 minutes away) who was more than happy to have me take as much of their horse manure as I wanted!

The heap was located outside of their main property (so super easy access – pretty well any time I wanted) and even had a resident population of Red Worms! Up until this point my manure gathering efforts had been limited by

either long driving times or very strict (and inconvenient) pick-up schedules with other suppliers.

I was totally *floored!*

Fast forward to early July...

I received a response to my gardening services ad asking if I was interested in 10-15 hours of work per week...no other details shared.

While I liked the idea of more hours in one place (it's all the unpaid driving time that takes the fun out of it), I was already really busy and not sure I wanted to take on any more jobs.

I almost didn't reply!!

(I shudder just thinking about it now)

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Well thankfully (and obviously) I *did* end up replying ;-)

I won't claim I was struck by a beam of divine guidance, and just "KNEW" I needed to respond - but I figured it wouldn't hurt to at least learn a little more about where they were located and what sort of work they were interested in.

Within a few more email exchanges, I had learned that it was a 100 acre country property (Score! - *much* more interesting than city work), and not only was it a mere 15 minutes away, but it was literally just around the corner from where I was picking up horse manure (Double Score)!

Fast forward to a week later, and there I was, driving up a long gravel laneway to meet with the property owner for the first time. The front of the property literally made me a bit nervous (and I even texted my wife to let her know the address just in case I went missing - lol). It looked overgrown and abandoned - not at all what I was expecting. The only intact building I saw was a large shed that looked like something out of "Texas Chainsaw Massacre".

What on earth had I gotten myself into?!!

But then the laneway took a sharp turn around the shed, and suddenly a palatial estate came into view in the distance. There was a massive (and very modern) house, a huge warehouse of some sort, and what looked like a small horse stable and paddock.

I pulled into a guest parking area near the horse barn right as a man (who looked to be my age or younger) was walking by with some horse gear. He stopped and smiled, waiting for me to come over.

The conversation that unfolded next completely and utterly blew my mind...

He was indeed the property owner (definitely not what I had expected). He asked how things were going with the gardening services ad...which almost immediately led to me telling him about my "real" (vermicomposting) business. He seemed impressed by that, explaining that he too was very interested in vermicomposting - but that he had run into challenges with keeping the worms alive during the winter.

I shared some advice on easy ways to set up winter-proof worm beds, and told him about my exciting new manure supply just around the corner from him (as it turns out, his property literally backs onto their property).

Without missing a beat, he literally told me I was welcome to use his truck if I ever wanted to do some bigger manure runs - and even invited me to set up beds there on the property if I wanted to ("there's lots of room!").

I did my absolute best to pick my jaw up off the ground as casually as possible, but it was darn near impossible to contain my excitement.

And thus began what has become the most amazing (yet utterly down-to-earth ...literally) strategic partnership you can imagine.

I did quite a lot of paid work during the summer and early fall - tending to his young apple orchard and a huge array of potted trees awaiting planting, cleaning out ornamental and veggie gardens...even some composting/vermicomposting projects.

But the biggest deal of all - something I purposely offered to do on my own time (as an act of good faith, and since I would benefit from it as well) - was hatching a plan for, and then setting up, our first large-scale vermicomposting bed. Something that could produce tons (literally) of quality vermicompost that could be used around the property the next season, along with "bazillions" of worms.

I knew it needed to be something epic!

Something that would offer protection from the elements – including the extreme cold of the winter months ahead. Something that could provide a continuous supply of vermicompost once "primed". Something that would take advantage of various resources - such as huge heaps of wood chips - that he had available on the property.

So what did I come up with?

A trench-based walking windrow...with wood chip reservoir ("false bottom") underneath, of course!! ;-p

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Site and Material Selection

Once I knew the owner was on board, the next step was to choose a good spot for the bed. Right off the bat, three key requirements came to mind:

- 1) **Ease of Access** - this project is basically my "baby", and virtually all of the time it's just me there working alone, so I knew the site would need to be very close to the front of the property (much easier to come and go as I please).
- 2) **Good Shelter** - the last thing I wanted was an exposed windrow out in the middle of a field. Beds like this work best when sheltered from both heat and cold.
- 3) **Close to Important Resources** - even before I had made a firm decision

about the type of bed I would set up, I suspected the ample supply of wood chips would end up playing a role. All the wood chip heaps were near the front of the property. This is also an overgrown area, with good access to a huge supply of long grass and weeds.

The first site I fell in love with was an old barn foundation I had spotted during early visits to and from the property. It was very close to the road (and right next to laneway), it had lots of trees around it for excellent shelter, and I liked the idea of the bed sitting on a concrete pad.

The owner was actually very agreeable about the idea, but it soon became apparent that it was a storage area for their contractor, and we agreed that it probably made sense for me to keep scouting.

Boy, am I ever glad I did!

Right across the laneway from the old barn is an elevated ridge lined with trees and shrubs. In the middle of the ridge there is an excavated demolition site where the original property farmhouse once stood. Most of the debris from the house has been removed, apart from countless bricks.

Just in front of the excavation site I found a gully filled with giant burdock plants and other monster weeds. On first glance it didn't look like much, but I quickly realized that everything about it was just about "perfect"! It was extremely well-sheltered, had soil not cement (will come back to this in a minute), was very close to the laneway (and road), yet fairly well hidden from people driving by.

Once again, the property owner agreed it was a great choice (as I've joked with him, I think he is quite possibly the most agreeable person I've met - lol) and I got the official green light to get the ball rolling.

Getting back to the topic of soil vs cement...

There's no doubt that beds sitting on cement pads offer an extra layer of protection (literally) from various invaders accessing the bed from the soil (eg moles), and it is also a good way to ensure your worms (and castings) remain somewhat more "contained". But the trade-off is that everything is basically above-ground, and thus more exposed to the elements. Plus you won't end up with the same sort of drainage that soil offers.

Once I knew I had soil access - and because it was a topic I was thinking about a lot at the time (had been working on a course relating to it) - I decided right away that the bed should have a substantial trench component. I have had great success with trench/windrow combo beds in my own yard over the years. They are hard to beat for keeping worms well protected from weather extremes.

I decided on the "walking windrow" approach since I would no longer be limited by the confines of the old barn foundation - and the "continuous" vermicompost supply (once primed) would be a lot better for the property owner than the periodic supply a batch system would have offered.

I really liked the idea of creating a thick wood chip foundation because: **1)** there was a huge supply of the material on the property already, **2)** it is an excellent bulky, carbon-rich material to serve as a "false bottom" for the bed - keeping the worms separated from excess moisture down in the bottom, while offering them an even more protected zone to retreat to if they want to, **3)** the owner uses wood chips all over the property, so I figured a "vermi-wood-chip" mix (stuff harvested from the false bottom, and just generally screened out, later) would be even more valuable.

All in all, I couldn't have been more thrilled about how everything fell into place early on. While I'll be the first to admit (and you'll see) that my progress initially - late August, early September - was quite slow, my momentum really started to pick up as fall progressed, and I ended up very well prepared for the cold winter months that lay ahead.

Phase I (Late August to Late November 2018)

As touched on, it took me a little while to finally get started with the site excavation, but once the wheels were in motion everything started feeling that much more "real", and the energy and momentum of the project only continued to build from there.

Might seem funny/strange, but one of my greatest joys associated with the project came from the often-grueling physical labor that was required early on. I've put in plenty of hours of digging etc in my own yard - but this was definitely

a different sort of beast altogether.

This was by far the rockiest soil I had attempted to dig a trench in, so that definitely slowed down my progress somewhat. It's funny - the property owner stopped by for a chat one day (early on) while I was toiling away, and suggested that he should rent an excavator for me.

"Now you tell me!!!", I joked...but in all seriousness, apart from not wanting to put any sort of demand on his time (and finances), when it came down to it, there's nothing quite like the feeling of creating something epic (by 'suburban worm farmer' standards anyway) *completely* by hand. :-)

IMPORTANT NOTE: I definitely don't want to give the impression that this is the sort of effort you would need to put in to create your own version of this bed - especially if your region has a warmer climate. If anything, I'm now even more convinced that a compact version of this type of bed could work incredibly well in a typical backyard.

NO, this was mainly me being me ("crazy", at times naively-optimistic, and pretty well *always* overly-enthusiastic) - wanting to go all out for the sheer fun of it - and to hopefully improve my chances of making it through the winter.

Moving on...

Apart from trench digging, two other very important sub-projects early on were: **1)** worm "seed heap" establishment and **2)** resource gathering/hoarding.

What exactly do I mean by "worm seed heap?"

It is the initial safe habitat zone established for a "seed" population of composting worms in a walking windrow. Regardless of what's going on in the leading edge of the bed (the "wedge" zone) where new food deposits get added - the worms will always have this safe zone to hang out in or retreat back to if need be.

The key is to set-up this heap somewhat carefully, and (ideally) gradually over time. If you simply dump down a huge pile of manure and/or other rich materials, it will almost certainly start heating up a lot, potentially with other hazards (eg ammonia release) developing as well.

I started by creating a fairly shallow pit for this section of the bed, which I filled with wood chips. I then lay down sheets of corrugated cardboard to serve as a sort of floor/platform for the worm zone to sit on top of. Next I simply laid down a modest deposit of worm-rich, aged horse manure and straw.

IMPORTANT: Sorry to interrupt here, but (at the risk of stating the obvious) I just want to remind readers that there is also a great deal of information (including photos & videos) relating to all this found in the Walking Windrow Journal – so be sure to check that out once finished the guide!

Over time I continued to bulk this zone up more and more with both food and bedding materials, but as winter approached – and with the leading edge zone well-established established – I mainly stopped adding any rich foods and focused a lot more on bulking it up with thick layers of insulating materials (that could be considered "slow foods").

Not to toot my own horn (he says right before tooting his own horn - haha), but my temperature management worked out surprisingly well. Apart from the odd over-heating/cooling "hiccup" temps in the bed remained in the 20-30 C (68-86 F) range all the way along – yep, even through the winter (once again - more info about this to be found on the Walking Windrow Journal page)

As for "resource gathering/hoarding"...

One of my goals was been to use as many local, and freely-available materials as possible. Horse manure has always been of primary importance, but I wanted to make sure I would always have a variety of other options as well...just in case. I was reminded of the importance of this approach when I discovered one morning that the boarding stable nearby - where I had been getting my manure) - had spread their entire heap on the fields! As it turns out, I wasn't able to get any more manure from them after that either (long story short – while the lady I had been in touch with seemed more than happy for me to take it, and was actually surprised to learn it had been spread, my hunch is that there was a least one other person involved who wasn't quite so thrilled about the arrangement! lol)

Thank goodness I had been creating my own little stockpile of it at the project site! (And as you'll see in a minute, things *really* turned around on the manure front a few weeks later)

I've mentioned the wood chips multiple times already, but various other materials I rounded up included fall leaves, pumpkins, garden wastes, meadow grass and weeds. There was some promise of potentially getting spent grains from a local brewery down the road - especially since the property owner knows them well - but I didn't end up bothering to pursue this too too actively in an effort to keep things as manageable as possible (and since I had access to plenty of other materials).

As I've learned - the hard way - taking wastes from a business like that can require a lot more time and commitment, so it's important not to just rush into it, fueled solely by blind optimism and excitement.

Getting back to the horse manure situation...

The good news was that I ended up securing an even better supply! There happens to be a horse ranch basically across the road from the property and I reached out on the off chance that I might be able to go and collect some of their manure. Honestly - I wasn't overly-optimistic about my chances (especially since they literally *sell* bags of it to local gardeners). So, I was completely floored when they not only told me they'd be happy to give it to me – but that they'd be willing to literally drop off as much as we needed at no charge!

This was indeed a very, *very* exciting development. As it turned out, they dropped off 4 big loads of manure shortly thereafter. In an effort to keep things remotely manageable, I requested that they hold off on further drop-offs beyond that. This ended up being enough for both me and the property owner (who used quite a lot on their garden) for quite a few months, and as I learned after the fact, they (the property owner) actually didn't have the best relationship with this person, so I ended up deciding not to arrange for more manure deliveries in 2019 (other factors involved in that decision as well).

With winter just around the corner I kicked things into high-gear "squirrel mode" - gathering as much usable material as I could and organizing it in various heaps near the bed. I built up a small wood chip heap (although, then used it all for the huge manure heap I built - lol), a meadow grass heap, and a special long-term "food heap" I built by layering fall leaves, manure, wood chips, and pumpkin waste.

This last one served as an important winter/spring food reserve (that offered a bit more variety/nutrition than just plain horse manure). The key idea was to

get it big enough so that I wouldn't have to worry about it freezing solid for as long as possible. This worked out fairly well early on, but eventually I wasn't able to easily access the material, so I just left it to sit until it thawed out in the spring.

I had hoped to round up even more leaves and pumpkins (than the sizable collection I was able to amass) before permanent snow arrived – I also had wanted to bulk up my meadow grass heap a lot more (since I suspected it would be - *and it did indeed end up being* - a very important cover layer for the bed in the winter).

But, all in all, I was thrilled with the progress made during this phase and felt very “ready” for the cold months ahead!

Phase II & Beyond

There is no doubt that the first phase of the Walking Windrow project was the most active, and critically-important for what lay ahead. I was fueled by a lot of optimism about the whole thing – it just felt almost “meant to be”. Feeling very confident that many people would be interested in signing up for the “Follow-Along” (the educational part of the project YOU are helping to support – thanks again!), I ended up sinking a lot more time into my efforts than might have been the case otherwise.

Once I realized that there wasn't nearly as much interest as I had anticipated, I needed to scale back my efforts quite a bit – especially once spring 2019 arrived.

As I've written/said elsewhere, I absolutely don't want to dwell on the shortcomings and disappointments associated with the project – even with not being able to do remotely as much with the project as I originally planned it still ended up feeling like a major success!

It was the first time I was actually able to keep an outdoor vermicomposting bed fully-active – and this was during an incredible cold “polar vortex” period. This ongoing access to an active (and vastly expanded) Red Worm population provided me with the worm supply needed to start getting indoor production bins going in late January – and as a result, I was able to open up my local business far earlier than most years.

Things only improved for the business once spring arrived, and I ended up having access to a rich supply of worms all season long (with none of the climate etc related bottle-necks I've encountered most seasons).

The windrow didn't end up doing all that much "walking" (haha) – but I actually consider this a win since it made me realize a bed like this could be very effective and productive even on a manageable "backyard" scale! I've loved my backyard trench/windrows over the years – but I now know that an open-ended hybrid approach is even more powerful.

Although I wasn't able to do nearly as much harvesting/screening of finished material as I had originally intended, the bed certainly produced a huge quantity of amazing compost. I did screen some bags of it for the property owner – and was really impressed with both the vermicompost and the bulky screenings (thanks to all those wood chips added), the latter which would make an excellent "vermi-mulch".

Rather than get into all the ins and outs of what went wrong (and right) with the project here in the welcome guide, I shall now recommend that you spend some time going through all the Walking Windrow journal entries (including Spring and Fall 2019 updates). If you made it this far you should at least have a solid handle on how things developed and (hopefully) will want to dive in and learn a lot more!

On that note, I shall sign off for now! Please make sure you take the time to explore all the member content available to you – and don't EVER hesitate to reach out with any questions/concerns you may have!
Thanks once again!

Your friend in (Walking Windrow) Worm Composting,

Bentley "Compost Guy" Christie

