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**From the Bay to the Garden,** is the mantra and the background story of **“The World’s Biggest Crab Feast.”**

# Crab Feast *to* Compost

**WHAT'S GOOD FOR US IS GREAT**

**FOR MOTHER NATURE**

By Elvia Thompson  
Photography by Tony Lewis, Jr.





**T**he Annapolis Rotary Club has turned the operation of its annual Crab Feast—now in its 72nd year—completely on its head several years ago by directing food and service ware waste to the compost farm rather than the landfill.

It took a great deal of cooperation among the Rotarians, the Annapolis Green nonprofit, and the Veteran Compost company over the course of three years to make “zero-waste” a reality at this high visibility and iconic event.

Here’s how it started. Annapolis Green approached the Rotary in 2013 and proposed composting the huge amount of food waste produced by the 2,500 feasters to keep it out of the landfill. Rotary agreed to try out the project in the Preferred Dining area that accommodates almost 300 people. Annapolis Green got busy explaining the composting process to the Rotarians and working with the Crab Feast committee to consider changing the service ware purchasing (plates, knives, forks, spoons, soup bowls) to the compostable type. Rotarians got on board

immediately, understanding the importance of reducing their impact on the landfill. The 2013 effort was so successful that the Rotary agreed to take composting to the entire Crab Feast the following year.

The first couple of years were challenging because there were products that had to be separated out: not only single-use plastic water bottles and cans, but also the cutlery and tiny seasoning cups. But now, since there are compostable versions of everything—including beer cups—the cleanup is much faster and easier.

Between 2014 and 2016, the process was refined and in 2016 a full 13 tons of compostable product was taken to the Veteran Compost farm in Aberdeen and turned into sweet-smelling soil amendment, or fertilizer. The crab shells, watermelon rinds, soup bits, hot dog leftovers, and even beer leftovers are returned to the Earth in the form of garden compost. Veteran Compost, the area’s only licensed composting company, has been Annapolis Green’s partner in composting for more than seven years.

Justen Garrity, owner of Veteran Compost, says he especially enjoys working the Crab Feast. “It’s the biggest special event we do and the most involved in terms of logistics,



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staff support, and sheer volume.” In the past two years, he has brought two staff people to help at the feast. When volunteers wheel his 96-gallon totes full of food waste to the specially-lined dumpsters, he and his staffers are ready to empty them and screen out any non-compostables; not that this is an issue at this event.

“Really, it’s amazing how clean it is and that’s thanks to all the volunteers who help people separate out the compostables from the recyclables right at the table,” Garrity says. “And thanks to the signs that Annapolis Green puts out everywhere.”

Then there’s the question of cost. Moving to compostables has actually allowed Rotary to save a bit of money on the service ware and on waste disposal. Annapolis Green helped the Rotary change what it buys for the event from plastic knives, plates, and cups to compostable versions. That not only resulted in nothing going to the landfill, but also a 70 percent reduction in recycling because so much plastic was eliminated. In fact, at the 2016 Crab Feast, there were only 25 to 35 bags of recycling to be picked up since most of the waste was composted.

Veteran turned the Crab Feast waste into sweet smelling, healthy compost in just two months.

How does that work exactly? Backyard composters know that it takes a long time for yard waste and kitchen scraps to break down enough to become a usable soil amendment. It’s the sheer amount

of material Veteran Compost deals with that makes it possible for tough materials like crab shells and bones to decompose relatively quickly. Big piles get very hot, speeding up the natural rotting process. Garrity also has developed a proprietary formula that includes adding wood chips, water, and aeration to the big piles. In the winter, the piles emit steam and you can feel the heat coming off of them...more so when Garrity’s staff turns them over with tractors and backhoes. “We have enough thermal mass to break the materials down quickly without smelling bad and attracting raccoons and other animals,” he says.



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"I wouldn't advise trying to compost crabs in the backyard," he adds. "It gets pretty smelly if it's not broken down quickly. In fact, by the time the compost actually gets to the farm, it's already started to break down in the dumpster. Within 48 hours, our piles are already at 140 to 150 degrees."

The natural process of rot and decomposition creates Mother Nature's best fertilizer. Compost is much better than manufactured fertilizers since those add no life to the soil; that is, none of the microorganisms that plants need to thrive and to create food that is nutritious and good for us.

Composting is a growing business. There is a U.S. Composting Council and jurisdictions around the country such as San Francisco and Seattle have made composting mandatory. The reasons for this are not only based on environmental issues, but also on the fact that more than half of municipal solid waste in the United States is made up of organic material that can be composted.

Garrity has already expanded his business, mostly with big industrial clients like hospitals and schools, to Northern Virginia and the District of Columbia. "Yes, I hope that someday in the future, the crabs won't have to travel so far to turn into compost," he says, adding that he is on the hunt for a farm in Anne Arundel County.

Working with Veteran Compost brings another sense of satisfaction, too, in that it was set up by an Army veteran, Garrity, to employ other vets.



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The Annapolis Rotary is to be commended for all the hard work that goes on behind the scenes for months. It's the organization's largest fundraiser and the proceeds go back into the community in the form of grants for various worthy causes.

For many local families, the Crab Feast is their annual family reunion. For other people, it's a fun afternoon with friends. For a lot of "newbies," it's a chance to learn how to pick crabs and enjoy the bounty of the Bay, from corn on the cob and watermelon from the Eastern Shore to locally-prepared BBQ and of course, our beloved crustacean, *Callinectes sapidus*, the beautiful swimmer, or Atlantic Blue Crab.

For Annapolis Green, it's a great example of how the community, working together, can have fun and be good to the environment at the same time, just by changing the way we work and play. Working along with the Rotarians is a cadre of non-Rotarian volunteers who tote compost and recycling to the dumpsters, who buss tables, and who explain the process to the feasters.

Annapolis Green is working to fund the purchase of a product that will replace the single-use plastic water bottles with an eco-friendly solution. When that happens, the only non-compostable products at the Crab Feast will be metal soda cans!

This August 4th, when the 2017 Crab Feast winds down, feasters will remember the volunteers working hard to make everything run smoothly. What they won't see are little microorganisms already hard at work starting to break down the crab shells right in the dumpster, right at the Navy Marine Corps Memorial Stadium. Mother Nature does it right. Composting is just following her lead...and doing the right thing.

