

From Combat to Compost – A MarketMaker Member Spotlight

Whether you are a military officer issuing orders or enlisted personal carrying out those orders, one of the most important qualities needed to be successful, is *adaptability*. Often service-members are short on time, lack needed personal, or are working with limited resources-but the mission must still be carried out.

This lesson has served Justen Garrity well in starting his [value-added](#) Maryland business. The founder/president of [Veteran Compost](#), established in 2010, has overcome, endured, and succeeded by adapting to challenges and simply refusing to quit!

After returning from 10 years as a combat engineer officer for the Army and Army National Guard, Garrity, who holds a bachelor's degree in information systems from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, was rejected for dozens of job positions. Instead of getting upset or frustrated, he adapted and started his own business.



As a [Farmer Veteran Coalition](#) member, Garrity felt the urge to engage in farming in some way. He felt it was important to establish a sustainable business that gave him a sense of purpose. Liking the idea of recycling, he began exploring recycling options. He investigated scrapping and electronics recycling but landed on composting after determining that approximately 2/3 of the waste in the back of garbage trucks is *actually* compostable.

Knowing that veterans, imperfect foods, and food scraps can all be over-looked, under-utilized, and under-valued, the company's mission became to fuel growth with the people and materials that others pass over. They specialize in processing food scraps and compostable materials from many sources in Maryland, DC, Virginia, and nearby areas. Employees vary from truck drivers, baggers, soil blenders, water managers and soil scientist. Not all employees are Veterans, but many are, and veterans are given preferential consideration when hiring. Garrity notes that composting isn't for everyone, causing the company to create a 4-hour *trial* hiring session. Potential workers can work for a few hours (with pay) and decide if it is a good fit for them, prior to an investment of a lot of time or money.

Recognizing that many of their customers were first-time gardeners, Veteran Compost created free on-line tech support. Whether farmers are growing produce as their income or planting a small garden for personal use, they will find the help they need at Veteran Compost. “I love helping people grow stuff”, Garrity said, “I especially enjoy visiting with all different people that I come in contact with and discovering what the different composting needs are of chefs, farmers, caterers, even the Raven’s football stadium, and figuring out how we can help!”

The composting process takes approximately 90-120 days from start to finish. Materials are collected and brought (or delivered) to one of their locations. Anywhere from 15 to 30 tons of food waste and compostable materials are mixed with wood chips, after picking out any *trash*, eventually making it into barrels, where timed air blowers, force air into the material so that all those microbes, the bacteria, and fungi can break down food waste and wood chips. During this process, temps can go from 35-140 degrees in a matter of 48 hours, breaking down the debris. After cooling, it is fed into a loader that sifts all of the larger particles away from the smaller ones. All of the woodchips and shells that haven’t broken down completely repeat the process, leaving rich soil, which gets stockpiled for sale or bagging.



Veteran Compost uses dump trucks to deliver larger amounts to Organic farmers and cut-flower farms, but their best-selling product is bagged raised-bed mix. Comprised of a formulated soil that contains composted soil, Pete Moss [to control the PH], and rice hulls [for desired texture and moisture retention]. Other products include Organic Crab Compost, All-Natural Compost, Organic Worm Castings, Potting Mix, SuperSoil, Biochar, Organic Seed Starter and Topsoil.



In addition to their daily composting routine, the company provides additional services of Residential Food Scrap Collection, Commercial Food Scrap Collection, Special Event Composting, Food Scrap Drop-off, and Compost Consulting.

[Photo credit: Robert Lennox/MOAA](#)

Even with two locations and around 25 full-time employees, the demand for composting is much larger than the capacity of Veteran Compost or even all composting companies combined. According to [U. S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\)](#), there is an estimated 133 billion pounds of wasted food in America annually. That figure climbs to an estimated 1.4 billion *tons* globally!

Food loss occurs at every stage of the production and supply chain. Food damage on the farm can be caused by insects, rodents, birds, molds, and bacteria. Between the farm and retail sale, food loss can arise from problems during drying, milling, transporting, or processing. At the retail level, equipment malfunction, over-ordering, and culling can result in food loss. Consumers also contribute to food loss when they purchase or cook more than they need.

A planned third location would allow Veteran Compost to nearly double its current capacity, but the project was suddenly stalled in January 2023. While acknowledging the unexpected costs and delays, Garrity is very hopeful for a workable resolution for all concerned parties and stated the outpouring of support shown was humbling and completely unbelievable!