

Squirmy conservationists reduce garbage

Program uses worms for composting

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Conservation can be measured in gallons of water saved, in pounds of waste recycled, or, in Richard Johnson's neighborhood, worm by worm.

When the Issaquah man and his wife formed an "EcoTeam" with families living around them, they already were using a worm composting bin to cut down on garbage.

Johnson passed the idea on to neighbors, and soon he was passing on hundreds of worms, too. Of the four households on his team that finished the four-month conservation program this month, three now have worms in backyard bins, turning apple cores and melon rinds into fertilizer.

"I always thought it was kind of gross - you know, worms," says Elaine Chan, one of Johnson's teammates. "But after a while, I got used to it. They're almost like pets, and they really help."

Helping the environment through small steps in homes and neighborhoods is the purpose of the EcoTeam program, founded by the Woodstock, N.Y.-based Global Action Plan for the Earth (GAP).

Results in Issaquah have not been so small: The 62 Issaquah households that followed the program's workbook between 1992 and 1997 had a combined annual savings of 16,926 pounds of garbage, 913,903 gallons of water and 9,249 gallons of gasoline.

These "at-large teams" were so successful that GAP helped residents start a pilot program last year, partially funded through city and state grants.

This year, the Issaquah Sustainable Lifestyle Campaign became GAP's sixth fully funded EcoTeam program in the country, joining Portland and Bend, Ore.; Kansas City, Mo.; Columbus, Ohio; and Chattanooga, Tenn.



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Richard Johnson keeps his traditional composting bin next to his worm bins. He uses plastic containers with lids to keep rodents out. He and his wife formed an EcoTeam with their neighbors to turn household waste into fertilizer.

"We're ahead of Seattle," program manager Terry Risdon says proudly. Seattle Public Utilities has proposed funding for a GAP campaign in its city; Madison, Wis.; Burlington, Vt.; and Philadelphia are eyeing the program as well.

Seven Issaquah teams currently participate in the campaign, which is supported by \$20,000 from the city, \$20,000 from Puget Sound Air Pollution Control Agency and \$50,000 from King County.

About 20 more teams, each with four to eight households, will start this year, Risdon says, and each one tries to start two more teams. The program goal is to have 15 percent of the Issaquah School District, or 4,091 households, on EcoTeams.

Conservation is not the only goal: "We want to build a strong neighborhood network, too," Risdon says.

Teammates live within a few blocks of each other, often next door. Members of Risdon's team, which started the four-month program in May, now socialize and look after each others'

children.

"Since we were new in the neighborhood, that was part of (why we joined)," Chan says. "When I'm going to run errands now, I ask my neighbors if they need anything."

Of course, that's also one of the environmentally conscious behaviors encouraged in program workbooks: Joint errand-running cuts down on car trips. Workbooks divide conservation steps into five areas: transportation, water, energy, waste and consumption.

Members choose which strategies they want to adopt and later assess how they did. Chan and her husband cut down on chemical fertilizers, but found they couldn't completely cut them out; one team member "just didn't go for the worm bins," Johnson said.

Is there peer pressure among the teammates to see who can conserve the most? "Oh yeah, it's definitely there," Johnson said.

"But there's peer support, too."