

Master Recyclers lead the way to a greener Marion County



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(Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

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Sally White can't just throw a can into the recycling bin without rinsing it first. She knows that having food residue on it can gum up the works at the recycling facility. She's seen it happen.

White is one of 666 Master Recyclers whom the Marion County Public Works' Environmental Services office has educated about waste reduction and sustainability since the program began in 1994. The program is intended to empower residents to make their community greener.

During the five-week course, participants get in-class instruction and go on a variety of field trips that show what happens to their garbage after it leaves the curb and the systems in place to reduce and recycle that waste.

"It's just amazing to see the mountains — actual mountains — of stuff that goes in there," Millie Estrin said about touring places like the Brooks incinerator, which processes 90 percent of the county's garbage.

Classes cover how Marion County manages waste, how to reduce waste, reusing products and materials, composting with worms, and energy conservation.



Master Recyclers take a field trip to the Coffin Butte landfill in Corvallis. The class goes on several trips to local waste management facilities. *(Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)*

There are so many things people, even those who are already leading green lifestyles, can do to help the environment, and the class really opens their eyes to that, White said.

The next Master Recycler class starts Sept. 10, but applications are due Aug. 9. Each class runs from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursdays at the Marion County Public Works office, 5155 Silverton Road NE.

After completing the course, participants are required to give back 30 hours of related volunteer work. Program leaders prefer those hours have some kind of educational component so that more members of the community can learn best environmental practices.

Since the program started in '94, Master Recyclers have completed more than 8,000 volunteer hours, said Alan Pennington, waste reduction coordinator for the county.

"We're going to take over the world," Pennington joked. "We want a recycler on every block."

Public Works' Environmental Services office has only a handful of employees, but with an army of volunteers in the community, their reach is amplified.

"Our reach is everywhere when we have a lot of people out there who do what (the Master Recyclers) can do," he said.

As a whole, Marion County residents are some of the best at leaving behind a smaller carbon footprint. In 2013, Marion County reported the second-highest recovery rate in the state. Sixty-one percent of the materials that would normally go into the garbage didn't, Pennington said.

Pennington said it's amazing Marion County followed Multnomah so closely since the county up north has more resources.

"I truly think it would not be as high as it is without that force (of Master Recyclers) out there," he said.

For Estrin, being a Master Recycler means doing "your utmost in your own personal life to follow the three Rs, which are reduce, reuse and recycle," and then teach those in your sphere of influence about them.

Since Estrin took the class in 2004, she's volunteered hundreds of hours manning booths at community events and helped her synagogue become more sustainability focused.

Estrin started as a sustainability committee of one at Temple Beth Shalom, but her committee has since grown in numbers of volunteers and projects. The synagogue is starting a rain garden, grows organic produce for the Marion-Polk Food Share, has practically eliminated the use of plastics, and uses organic cleaning products whenever feasible, she said. The synagogue recently received its third EarthWISE certification through the county.

Because she's taken the class, Estrin thinks what she has to say about recycling carries more weight. When people don't know whether they can recycle or compost something, they turn to her, she said.

Having someone willing to personally help connect you to answers and resources makes a huge difference, Pennington said.

khessel@statesmanjournal.com, 503-399-6743 or follow on Twitter @KaellenHessel

Learn more

More information about the program and applications are available at www.masterrecycler.net. Applications can be emailed to environmentalservices@co.marion.or.us. Deadline to apply is Aug. 9.