

Compost will bring some life back to your land



Permaculture in Practice

by Nate Downey

In my grandmother's home "forgetting the compost" was not an option. If my family had an official "bad behavior scale" neglecting to scrape your plate into the milk carton next to the sink after a meal would have hovered somewhere in between swearing at the dinner table and using improper grammar in a crowd theater.

"Just bury me in my compost pile, so I can come up flowers," Grandma would say with proud humility.

For two or three very good reasons, state laws prohibit such burials but, to honor the spirit of Grandma's request, we poured a small bag of her celebrated black gold on her coffin last month. But you've never seen my grandmother's glorious garden and you might be wondering why you should go to

the trouble of composting.

Homegrown compost nurtures our planet (over 40 percent of our "trash" is compostable), strengthens our soil, saves you money, and performs wonders for the soul. In permaculture terms, composting is an excellent illustration of the "law of return," which states that for every gift we receive from nature we owe something back to her. So, the question really becomes, why wouldn't you compost?

There are about as many ways to compost as there are people who have ever tried. Successful composting, however, usually falls into one of two categories: cold and hot.

Cold composting is best described in John Jeavon's essential gardening book, *How to Grow More Vegetables*. The beauty of his system is that you only have to turn cold piles once, because they involve thin layers of green (nitrogen rich) and brown (carbon rich) materials at the outset. This makes turning the compost much less necessary.

Cold composting is best started whenever large quantities of materials are available. Cold piles take about an hour each to build, but need much less maintenance com-

pared to hot piles. Hot composting is the more common form of composting and works best when materials are added gradually over time. Hot compost can get too hot and burn up important microorganisms, while cold composts will not burn up weed seeds as effectively.

Grandma, who used a three-bin hot compost system, chose a perfect site: in dappled shade, protected from wind, near the kitchen, and close to a water source. The first bin received incoming kitchen scraps and yard wastes. The middle bin held half-finished compost. The last bin provided finished compost ready for use.

Grandma's bins were made of wood slats and wire fencing. This allowed air to get into the pile, while it discouraged rodents. She watered and turned her piles weekly, and the product was a dark humus teeming with worms.

No material will better improve our dry, nutrient-deficient soils better than homegrown compost. If you can, hand-dig compost into your soil. Scratching compost into the surface of the soil and/or using it as a mulch is also very effective way to retain moisture, aerate and fertilize.

Don't put into your compost meat and dairy products, oils and fats, poisonous plants or plants infected with disease, corncobs, orange peels and other materials that take too long to break down, also pernicious weeds and cat and dog manure. And for those wishing to be cremated, know that ashes make compost more alkaline, which is not good for our acid-starved soils.

Cover your pile with a thick straw mulch. Add red worms, and do not forget to keep your compost as moist as a wrung-out sponge. Finally, don't feel guilty about watering your compost. It will ultimately help you save water in your garden.

EcoVersity plans a compost workshop called "From Waste to Gold: Composting for Gardeners and Landowners" on Saturday, Aug. 16. It will be held from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For more information, check out www.ecoversity.org, or call 424-9797.

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