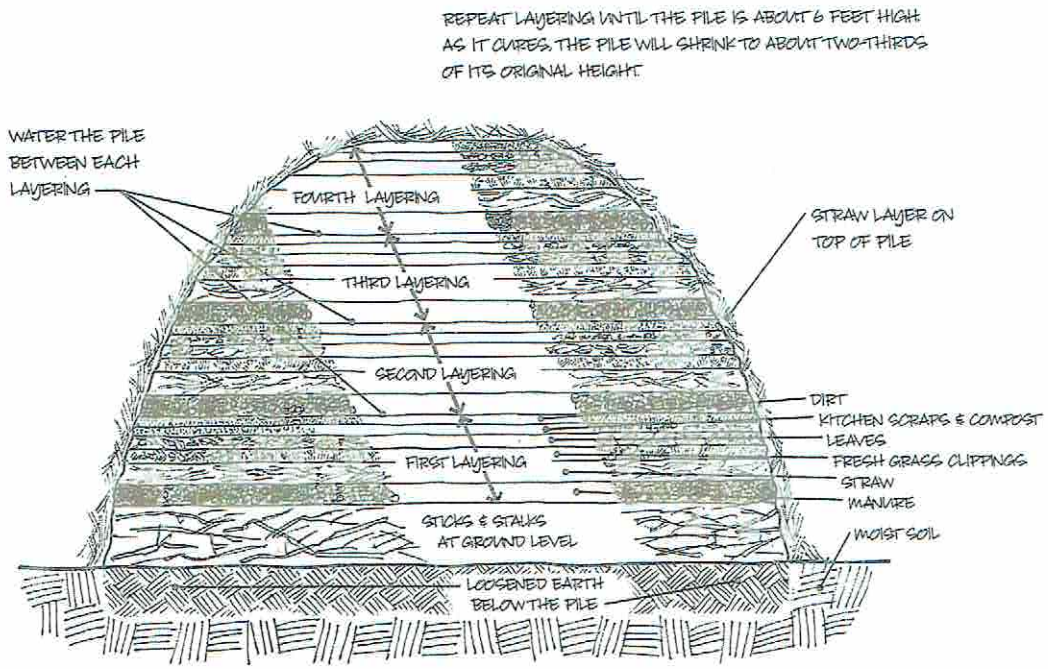
compost this

BY NATE DOWNEY



Back in the day, during countless conversations about saving civilization from itself, one idea used to pop up regularly. "It'll get worse," somebody would woefully admit, "before getting better." Unable to sense the proverbial pickle we had been sitting on since the advent of agribusiness, it was clear that our society was not going to muster real change until the pickle grew much bigger.

That was before the hideous hole at the bottom of the sea, ahead of the corporations-are-persons Supreme Court ruling, prior to the implosion of the Bush economy and in advance of the universal acceptance of the concept of climate change. Even though our pickle is now obvious, we're certainly not stuck in an insoluble jam. All that we must do is figure out how to relish the pickle we're in.

There are many ways to take great pleasure in being part of the solution to our global problems, and one of autumn's best examples comes by way of John Jeavons and his seminal book, How to Grow More Vegetables. There are many composting techniques out there, but Jeavons's method happens to be full of incentives. It provides an opportunity for healthy outdoor exercise, requires almost no maintenance, reduces water use in the garden, keeps "junk" out of landfills, and builds soil 60 times faster than nature.

First, determine a location for your compost pile. Unlike a typical pile, to which you add kitchen scraps several times a week, this pile need not be very close to the kitchen door. A place in the shade near a water source with enough room to turn the pile is best. Second, loosen the soil below your pile's location to a depth of 12 inches. This gives the pile ample drainage. Third, place sticks and stalks on top of the loosened soil to provide air circulation through the pile.

Fourth, start adding 1-inch to 2-inch layers of compost materials that alternate from green "wastes" (nitrogen rich) to brown "wastes" (carbon rich). Green

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wastes include kitchen scraps, hay, fresh manure and freshly cut garden products (weeds, grass clippings, hedge trimmings, tree prunings, leftover plant material from harvested crops, etc.). Brown wastes include leaves, straw, soil, aged manure, cardboard, cured compost, dry weeds, etc. Fifth, after you've added four to six layers (two or three of green material, two or three brown), water the layers. Repeat the fourth and fifth steps until the pile is four to six feet high. Cover the pile with straw or soil to keep it shaded, insulated and protected from wind. Turn and water the pile only once—about halfway through its four to six month curing period. When your compost is ready to use, the pile will have shrunk to between one and two thirds of its original size.

Soil loss is at the root of the challenges we face. If each of us would start a compost pile today and pledge to work the resulting humus into the soil come spring, next year our gardens would be much more productive, and we would relish the opportunities ahead.

Nate Downey is a frequent guest on public radio, a perennial presenter at green events, blogger, and the author of two books on water and sustainability. Nate's newest book, Harvest the Rain, is available this fall from Sunstone Press. Nate and his wife Melissa are the owners of a forward-thinking landscape-design firm, Santa Fe Permaculture. Their family shares a backyard brimming with bees, bunnies, chickens, all sorts of edible plants, lots of harvested rain, and a nice little patio for building community. Read Nate's blog at http://backyarddigest.blogspot.com/ e