

ORGANIC LIVING

By

Robert Rodale

COMPOST: THE MOST UNDERRATED PRODUCT

Compost has always been highly prized by people inside the organic movement. But the general public has found it difficult to get excited about the humus-rich, earthy soil enricher that's just a few short steps removed from ordinary garbage. Some communities that tried large-scale composting found they couldn't even give away the finished product.

Shortages of nonrenewable resources are changing all that. Just as scrap metal dealers are finally seeing profit in long-abandoned auto hulks, farmers and municipal officials are beginning to see new value in compost. With prices of nitrogen fertilizers such as anhydrous ammonia rising sharply in past months, it's suddenly easier to appreciate a "dirt cheap" substance like compost, that can do the same job of replenishing nutrients in farmers' fields.

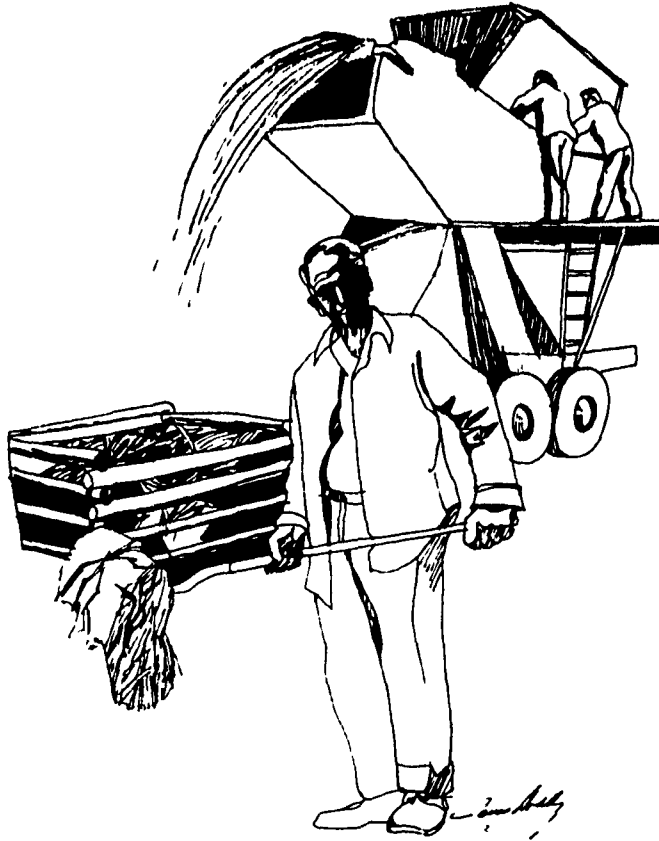
Thousands of American gardeners have been building and tending small compost piles in their backyards for years. They know the value of homemade compost in increasing vegetable yields. By feeding plant and animal wastes, garbage scraps and other organic matter into their heaps, they are completing an important natural cycle. Once the teeming microorganisms of decomposition have done their job and the compost is thoroughly rotted, it is ready to enrich their gardens.

You can build a frame for your compost pile with whatever materials are handy. Concrete blocks, bricks, snow fencing, wire mesh, or stones are all fine. A garbage can with holes punched in the sides and lid is probably the simplest approach of all.

Where you locate the pile depends on a number of factors. Many folks prefer an inconspicuous heap, nestled close to hedges or a wall. It's always a good idea to build your pile close to the garden so you won't have far to haul the finished compost when it's ready to be worked into the soil. Ideally, such a spot will also be close enough to your driveway or an alley that it's accessible to a small truck or station wagon. That way you can dump newly-acquired hay, manure and other bulky wastes right where they're needed.

Build the heap in layers to as high as five feet, alternating about six inches of plant material with two inches of nitrogen-rich material such as manure. A sprinkling of rock powder and a quarter inch or so of soil between layers will complete the "sandwich."

It's important to keep the pile moist (but not wet) and well-ventilated. The heap should be turned periodically, so all the



material is thoroughly broken down by the chemical action taking place inside. Expect garden-ready compost in two or three months, or in as little as 14 days if you use a shredder and follow certain techniques.

What should you put into your compost pile? Any organic material is a logical ingredient, so let your imagination run free. Many otherwise-troublesome wastes make convenient compost ingredients, as the following examples indicate:

— LEAVES. Pound for pound, the leaves of most trees contain twice as many minerals as manure. Grind or shred your leaves first to guarantee success.

— HAY. If you can get hay such as alfalfa or clover during its first year's growth, it will break down faster in the heap. Shred it first with a rotary lawn mower if you can.

— SAWDUST. Often available at giveaway prices from local lumber mills, sawdust has excellent soil-building properties.

— MANURE. High in nitrogen, manure from cattle, horses, goats or poultry is usually the mainstay of a good compost pile. Manure provides necessary bacteria that help break down the other materials quickly. If you can't find a fresh supply, bagged, dried manure is available from lawn and garden centers.

— GRASS CLIPPINGS AND WEEDS. What could be easier to obtain? Any weed seeds will be killed by the high temperatures inside the pile (as high as 150 degrees).

— DRIED BLOOD. Collected from slaughterhouses, this ingredient has a high nitrogen content (12 percent or more).

— BONE MEAL. This is a very good source of phosphorus for the garden.

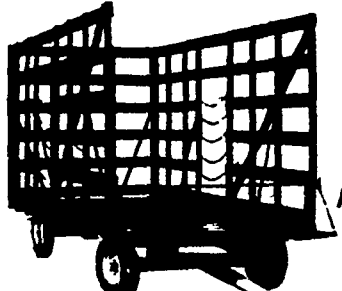
— GARBAGE. Relatively high in nitrogen, kitchen scraps decay quickly when added to the green matter in a compost heap.

What gardeners are doing on a small scale, communities could be doing on a large scale. "Compost may be the most misunderstood product in America," says recycling authority Dr. Clark Gregory of Georgia Institute of Technology. Municipal composting plants are operating successfully throughout Europe, Gregory reported after a recent four-month tour.

Someday soon, many American communities are going to discover composting as the solution to their sewage and other solid waste disposal problems. We may even see barren strip-mined areas reclaimed with material produced in such plants. The 1974 Composting Conference, scheduled for May 2 and 3 in El Paso, Texas, is expected to draw hundreds of city, state and federal government officials, businessmen, researchers and students. For details, write: Composting Conference, Compost Science Magazine, Emmaus, Pennsylvania 18049.

"Make Compost in 14 Days" is a 48-page illustrated booklet that contains all the information you need to make high-quality compost quickly and easily. Get your copy by sending 50 cents to Robert Rodale, Organic Living, in care of this newspaper. Ask for the booklet by name and please allow four weeks for delivery.

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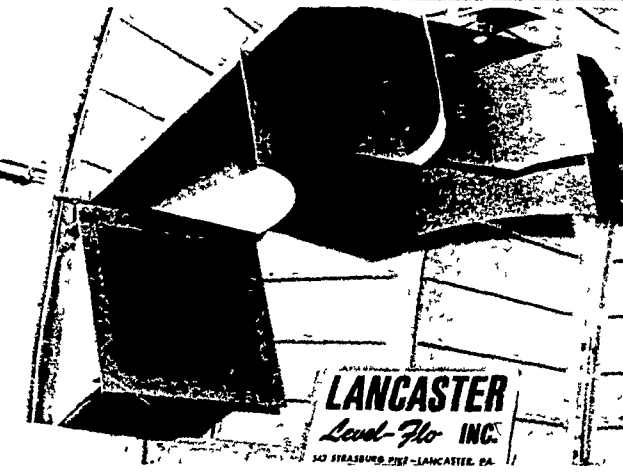
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