

COMPOST

NOTES

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Dear Composters

Dear Composters:

In May I was a participant in a tour of Delaware County's compost facility. This high tech composting plant turns household garbage and sludge from wastewater treatment into compost. The first step is to remove large undesirable trash items with an overhead crane. Next the garbage and sludge are mixed, and placed in a huge, slowly rotating cylinder where composting begins. After an extensive and highly automated process of sorting, screening, and turning they end up with a reasonably respectable compost product. It's not the dark, rich looking compost you harvest from a home compost bin, but it meets government standards for use on non-food crops. It is being sold and used for topsoil blends, turf establishment, landscaping, and erosion control. While the Delaware County composting program certainly fills a waste management need, the tour also reinforced my belief that the basis of any municipal organic waste management program should be a strong home composting program.

Cheers,

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Ask Dr. Compost



Can I use compost to mulch my flowerbeds?

Yes, but it may not be the best choice depending on what you are expecting the mulch to do. Mulch is a protective material spread over the soil surface to suppress weed growth, conserve moisture, prevent soil erosion, and protect plant roots from temperature extremes. Organic mulches including compost, bark, wood chips, grass clippings and straw also add organic matter to the soil as they decompose. The most significant drawback of using compost as mulch is that it doesn't suppress weeds as well as other mulches. Some weed seeds can sprout and grow in the compost. Compost mulch also doesn't last as long as bark or wood chips.

Compost can be applied as a 2-3 inch thick layer around flowers or vegetable plants. Course rather than fine compost works best, especially if you are trying to control soil erosion on a slope. Most home composters can't make enough compost to meet their needs, so they should probably use their compost to mix with garden soil rather than use it for mulching. However, if you have a large supply of compost it does make a reasonably good mulching material.

Be careful when applying compost and bark mulch if the material is still hot. Many gardeners have killed tender young plants when they placed fresh hot mulch on their gardens. If you get a load of hot mulch, spread it out and let it cool down before applying it. If you can, let it rain on the mulch or water it. This will help flush out any plant toxins that may be present.

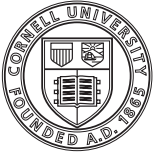
Composting To Reduce Global Warming?

A number of studies by scientists have shown that composting organic waste instead of landfilling or incinerating it helps reduce global warming. Two important factors are that compost use reduces the use of artificial fertilizers and increases the amount of carbon stored in soils. Production of artificial fertilizers requires large amounts of energy, and therefore adds to the amount of carbon dioxide emissions. Soils have the ability to store (or sequester) large amounts of carbon, so in addition to improving soil, adding compost to soil helps reduce global warming. When it comes to global warming, home composting is even better than large-scale composting because the organic wastes don't have to be collected, transported, and processed using fuel-burning vehicles and equipment.



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Adding Worms to Gardens

We continue to get questions about adding worms to gardens. Some of the commercial sources of worms even suggest this when marketing their worms. It's very doubtful that adding worms to your gardens will be helpful. Worms used for composting, such as red worms, are usually not soil dwelling worms, thus it makes no sense to add them to your garden. You may also inadvertently introduce another invasive worm species to the local environment. Worms prefer soil rich in organic matter, so if you want worms in your garden amend it with compost. Adding red worms to compost piles or bins is also a waste of money. Once the compost has broken down a bit worms will invade your pile from the surrounding environment.

Compost Bins Available

The Broome County Division of Solid Waste Management has made arrangements to make compost bins available to county residents at wholesale prices. The bins, called Earth Machines, are recycled black plastic holding bins with a capacity of 80 gallons. While all the details are not yet available, the price will be in the \$30-40 range. If you are interested in a bin, please contact Kevin at kjm8@cornell.edu or at 584-5013.

Compost at the Landfill

Broome County residents can get compost at the Broome County Landfill. Landfill staff produce compost from yard waste using the turned windrow method. It is available to residents in amounts up to 60 gallons during regular landfill hours (7 a.m.- 2:45 p.m. weekdays, 7 – 11:45 a.m. Saturdays). You must load it yourself, so bring containers and a pitchfork or spade. Supplies are limited, so you may want to call the landfill at 763-4434 to check on availability.

Upcoming Events



Garden Walk Series in Cutler Botanic Garden. 6-7:00 p.m.

July 24: Herbs, nature's medicine chest

August 7: All-American Selection Flowers

August 28: Getting to Know the Tomato Family

\$6.00 per person per walk. Call (607) 584-9966 for further information.

Cutting Edge Vegetable Gardening in Cutler Botanic Garden

July 31, 6:00 p.m., \$6:00 per person

Call (607) 584-9966 for further information.

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