HOME & GARDEN

Composting 'closes the loop'

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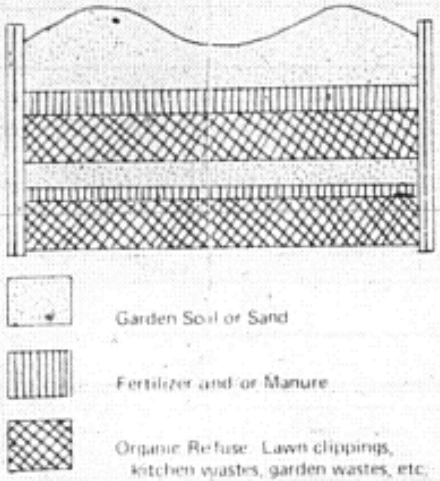
Because of reorganizing my garden area this spring, I had to plow up the space occupied by my compost pile. I spread it on the garden first (along with manure, lime and the cover crop that was going to be turned under) even though the whole pile wasn't "finished." Now I have to start a new pile from scratch.

Compost is a very important part of my fertilization plan because it "closes the loop." The garden and my farm animals produce refuse of one kind or another, and I take that refuse and return it to the soil to create a soil that is rich and alive with microorganisms in the decaying organic matter. It is that richness that produces healthy vegetables for my family and in some degree for my chickens and pigs.



BETWEEN THE ROWS

It has been shown that only weak plants are bothered by disease and pests to the degree that they are seriously damaged. The way to raise a vigorous and healthy plant is to very carefully and conscientiously feed the soil with everything the plant will require. Compost is one of the way I keep my soil fed.

Creating compost also appeals to my fantasy of becoming the archetypal frugal New England housewife who not only practices thrift, but who also brings in abundance out of that thrift.

Even more, I have always wanted to be a white witch, one who practices a beneficent magic. And what greater mystery is there than to be able to creature treasure out of refuse, to create life and strength out of dead debris?

That is how compost starts out — as refuse and debris. Every household produces garbage. Garbage is often a problem as so many towns with outmoded landfill dumps have become aware. Some of that garbage could be recycled and turned into new glass, paper and aluminum, and some could conceivably be burned to create energy. But some garbage can be utilized right at home in the garden.

Every potato and vegetable peeling, every broccoli, cauliflower or wilted lettuce leaf or uneaten mashed potato can be used in the garden.

If you are a householder with a yard to tend, there is more refuse for you to make use of — leaves and grass clippings. Even the weeds from the garden can become a minor blessing. They have brought nutrients up from deep in the soil into their leaves, and those nutrients can be returned to the soil by composting.

I am one of the fortunate ones because I raise my own animals, so I get to harvest eggs, roasting chickens and ham, and I also get to harvest manure. Manure is a good source of the three major nutrients needed by the soil: nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium — especially nitrogen.

One summer I was working as a guide in Historic Deerfield, and one quiet day I browsed through an agricultural practices handbook that was printed in the early 1800s. The farmer was advised not to skimp on the quality of the food he fed his cattle. Not only would their health and milk suffer, but also the manure they produced would be of a lower quality. A well-fed animal would produce a high quality manure that could be fed back to the land to continue the cycle of richness and vitality.

It should be noted that the excrement produced by cats and dogs is not a valuable fertilizer, and it can even carry dangerous pathogens into the garden. Cattle, horse and poultry manures are most commonly available and used and are safe even when they have not been composted.

With a supply of materials, building the compost pile is not difficult, and it does not have to be built to size all in one day. An effective size is a pile that is 5'x5'x5'.

I begin my pile with a thick layer of vegetable matter like leaves, old hay, grass clippings and garden and kitchen refuse. Then I add a layer of nitrogenous materials, like manure. It is this layer of materials that will get the pile "cooking," so be generous. If you don't like manure, bloodmeal, bonemeal and cottonseed meal can all be used. Finally, I add a layer of soil, and wood ashes if I have them, or a sprinkling of lime and rock phosphate. This layering is repeated until I have used everything I have available at the time. It may take a period of weeks before the pile reaches 5 feet high, but this does not matter.

It is important to make an identation at the top of the pile each time a building session is finished. This will collect rain water. If the weather is dry, you may even want to water the pile. Moisture is another vital ingredient. It will help the pile heat up, thus speeding up the decomposition process.

Air is also important. I poke holes in the pile with a long pole and every so often I turn the pile. This aerates the pile and brings the outer layers into the center where the decomposition is going on the fastest.

A pile will decompose and turn into that magical substance, compost, at varying speeds. If the materials in the pile are cut up very small and the pile is an optimum size, the pile will become compost very fast. With care, you can make compost in 14 days. Personally, I don't worry too much about how long it takes. I look at the compost pile-in-progress as money in the bank.

There is nothing so beautiful and sweet as compost. It is rich and black and crumbly and bears absolutely no resemblance to all the refuse that has gone into its making. It is truly a black gold and much more accessible and cheaper than the petrochemicals that go into commercial fertilizer.

Compost can be tilled into the soil before planting, and you can side-dress your rows with compost for a little boost in the middle of the summer. I often use a partially finished compost for this side-dressing and the garden is the richer for it.

By making compost I can take all the scraps of goodness that have come out of the soil, which seemingly have no value, and return them to the soil, making it truly rich and capable of sustaining life.