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## Compost that your plants and the planet will love

**By Tom Watson**

*Special to The Seattle Times*

When I worked in a garden store back in the '70s, if a customer wanted to buy something to improve the soil in his garden, he had two choices: a small bale of peat moss or a large bale.

Today, gardeners can choose from dozens of varieties and blends of compost, manure, peat moss and other products. What are the most eco-friendly and economical ways to give your garden soil a boost? Follow these tips:

**Hold the hype.** In general, the longer the description of fancy ingredients, the more you'll pay. Exotic additives such as oyster shells and bat guano sound cool, but they may only be present in tiny quantities and don't necessarily add much to the mix. A basic compost or simple blend (two to three ingredients) should do the job just fine.

**Act naturally.** Gardening experts agree that any soil can be improved by adding organic matter. Stick with organic products, rather than inorganic or synthetic soil products such as gypsum or vermiculite. Adding organic matter helps the soil absorb and use water and supports beneficial soil organisms.

**Do the numbers.** Look for the nitrogen-phosphate-potash percentage numbers that are posted on soil products that contain those nutrients. If at least one of those numbers is 0.5 or higher, that means your soil amendment probably has enough natural fertilizer to give your garden an extra nudge.

**Go local.** As a rule, the closer to home your products are produced, the better for the environment, since you reduce transportation impacts. Compost producers based in the Seattle area include Cedar Grove Composting, Walt's Organic Fertilizer and Sawdust Supply.



PAUL SCHMID / THE SEATTLE TIMES

The yard waste and food waste set out at your curb end up as the Cedar Grove compost you can buy at your local garden store. For a more offbeat local product, try Zoo Doo, a composted blend of manures and bedding from the animals of Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo.

### Compost resources

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**Making compost:** [www.seattle.gov/util/Services/Yard/Composting](http://www.seattle.gov/util/Services/Yard/Composting). Click on "Using Compost," then "Compost Resource List."

**Where to get manure:** Buy a blend from the Woodland Park Zoo, [www.zoo.org/zoo\\_info/special/zoodoo.htm](http://www.zoo.org/zoo_info/special/zoodoo.htm). Or call 206-625-POOP.

**Buying it cheap:** King County's [www.ecodeals.org](http://www.ecodeals.org). Click on in the "Yard Care/Soil Amendments" link. Or [www.yarddays.com](http://www.yarddays.com) offers store discounts each spring and fall.

**Calculate volume:** A nifty calculator is at [www.savingwater.org/outside\\_compostcalc.htm](http://www.savingwater.org/outside_compostcalc.htm).

**Learn more:** [www.compostwashington.org](http://www.compostwashington.org), [www.nwbiosolids.org](http://www.nwbiosolids.org), Washington State University Master Gardeners, [www.puyallup.wsu.edu/soilmgmt/Gardening.htm](http://www.puyallup.wsu.edu/soilmgmt/Gardening.htm).

**Grow your own.** Legions of Northwest gardeners know the most environmentally sound, money-saving approach is to make your own compost. By spending less than two hours a month on composting, and harvesting your own compost just once a year, you can produce more than enough for one medium-sized garden bed.

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Use grass and leaves from your own yard, leaves from your neighbors or coffee grounds from your local coffee shop.

**Dig for a deal.** Look for discounts on compost and related products, especially for larger quantities, such as 10 bags, or a pickup-truck load. King County's EcoDeals program lists

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several products.

Some of those products offer discount coupons for people who register on the EcoDeals Web site. In the Northwest Natural Yard Days promotion, sponsored by King County and other local governments, many local retailers offer discounts on compost and other products during September.

**Don't believe all the dirt.** A recent rampant Internet rumor that major chain stores were selling termite-infested mulch from Hurricane Katrina-impacted areas was an urban myth.

Another product that sometimes gets a bad rap is biosolids, which come from wastewater-treatment plant solids. But heat-treated and composted (Class A) biosolids have been extensively tested. Local biosolids products such as GroCo and Tagro provide a low-cost, nutrient-rich enhancement to your garden and landscaping beds.

**Mix and match.** Often you can save money and help your plants by mixing materials, both store-bought and homemade. For trees and shrubs, gardening experts Greg Rabourn and Doug Rice, hosts of King County Television's "Yard Talk" show, suggest using a "super mulch" of 1 inch of compost

covered by 3 inches of wood chips or tree trimmings.

**Jump in to the pile.** To compare soil products or learn more about applying them, the Internet offers vast resources. The Washington State University Master Gardeners' soils Web site includes links to several guides and slide shows. Also consult product manufacturers' Web sites, which often list ingredients, nutrient content and other useful information. To determine exactly how much compost you need, check out the local Saving Water Partnership's compost calculator on its Web site (see box).

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