

Originally published Saturday, March 26, 2011 at 11:16 AM

EcoConsumer

Compost's organic enhancement a natural for gardens

We have made great strides in turning leaves, grass clippings, food scraps, manure and various other organics into valuable soil amendments such as compost. But leaving out a part of the process. We're not using enough of the final product.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

The natural world thrives on decomposition and regeneration. Fallen leaves, needles and other organic materials in a forest return to the soil and feed the trees in a perfect cycle.

We humans have made great strides in turning leaves, grass clippings, food scraps, manure and various other organics into valuable soil amendments such as compost. But unlike in the forests, we're leaving out a part of the process. We're not using enough of the final product.

Q: Aren't lots of soil-enhancing compost and composted-manure products available at home-improvement stores and nurseries?

A: Yes, and many stores now carry a wider variety of those products than ever before. But the use of organic soil amendment products by homeowners, property managers and developers is still just a fraction of what it could be.

Q: Why is this a problem?

A: Enormous quantities of organic waste materials are generated from a multitude of sources including homes, restaurants, grocery stores, food-processing operations, feedlots and farms. If it's edible food such as day-old baked goods or produce, that should go to food-recovery programs, but the rest should ideally be converted into compost or energy.

Composting reduces global warming better than any other method for handling organic wastes, and large-scale composting is proven and efficient. For example, privately owned Cedar Grove Composting in Everett and Maple Valley processes most of our region's collected yard waste and food scraps. However, producers can only make as much compost as they are able to sell.

We should also use more of these products because the quality of any soil can be kicked up a notch by adding organic matter. By utilizing these materials once thought of as garbage, we can grow more food and healthier plants. Applying compost also prevents erosion on construction projects.

Q: How do these products specifically help the soil?

A: Adding organic material provides a pick-me-up for beneficial organisms and allows the soil to hold moisture better, conserving water and reducing runoff. Each type of organic soil amendment contains different nutrients. On a product's label or website, find information such as the carbon-to-nitrogen ratio and advice about how to use the product.

Q: Aren't synthetic fertilizers much more effective than organic soil amendments like compost and manure?

A: High-powered synthetic chemical fertilizers encourage rapid plant growth, but they can also harm soil organisms and cause pollution when runoff carries them into lakes and streams. Go natural with composted animal manure and organic fertilizers instead.

Q: I've heard about biosolids, but what are they exactly?

A: After we flush the toilet and the waste is piped to a treatment plant, the solids undergo an extensive digestion process that destroys pathogens and turns the raw waste into nutrient-rich biosolids.

Composted and mixed heavily with sawdust or other organic materials, biosolids are sold locally as soil amendment products such as GroCo and Tagro. These products have been thoroughly tested, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has given a thumbs-up to growing vegetables with them. Learn more at www.kingcounty.gov/biosolids.

Q: Is it hard to make my own compost?

A: Backyard composting can be as simple or involved as you like. Find abundant resources from King County, Seattle and Seattle Tilth with a quick Internet search. An easy way to get started is by composting leaves you rake up in the fall.

Q: If I make my own, and buy any additional compost I need for my yard, are there other ways to help increase the market for compost?

A: As a concerned citizen or in your job when possible, encourage developers and property managers to use organic soil amendments for large projects. That's the best way to significantly boost the demand. The Washington Organic Recycling Council offers resources for developers at www.buildingsoil.org.

So spread it around: Organic matter matters, and it's just what your soil needs.