

Got Compost?

Who doesn't know they should be composting by now? But you need to know the compost basics. Here's the nitty-gritty on why it's so beneficial to our crops.

By Jessica Walliser

Any properly functioning ecosystem should be self-supporting: Things grow, use energy, die and are eventually recycled back into "food" to begin the cycle anew.

As a result, there is no waste.

Consider the forest, whose fallen leaves and dead organisms go on to nourish the next generation of trees. Organic farmers must think of their soil as such an ecosystem.

Your compost bin--even as simple as one crafted out of chicken wire--will help you give back to the earth and grow better, healthier plants. Crops are planted, those plants use nutrients from the soil and when the plants die, they are recycled back into the earth through the process of composting. The cycle of life and death on an organic farm becomes an essential part of soil management.

Composting, used in an organized farm setting, allows the organic matter and nutrients used by plants to be returned to the soil.

Plants depend on soil organic matter for nutrients and disease suppression; while there is some organic matter naturally present in all soils, its quality and quantity are depleted by the plants growing in it.

There are, of course, other kinds of organic matter available to help organic farmers build their soil (including mushroom soil, peat moss and many others), but no other source provides plants with as many benefits as good-quality compost. And few other sources are made from ingredients readily available at home.

Why Compost?

The benefits of compost are many: It improves the structure of any soil, be it sandy, loamy or clay; soils amended with compost will retain more water and drain better. A mere 5 percent increase in organic matter quadruples a soil's water-holding capacity.

Compost contains not only macronutrients, but it also bears many trace nutrients; to top it off, this balanced array of nutrients is available in a slow-release form. Finished compost typically has .5 to 2.5 percent total nitrogen in either organic or slow-release form; about 10 percent of this amount is available in each subsequent year.

Imagine having rich compost to add to your gardens this year and into the future.

Compost helps balance soil pH, fosters good soil structure, and improves tilth and fertility.

It loosens clay soils and prevents nutrient leaching by loosely binding nutrients into the soil.

One of the most important benefits of compost is the diversity of soil life it supports and promotes.

Be it bacteria, fungi, worms or beetles, these creatures help process nutrients and create healthier, more pest-resistant plants. Compost is a known disease suppressor, with university research indicating that plants grown in soils regularly amended with compost have a marked reduction in diseases—particularly those diseases caused by soil-borne

pathogens.

In a nutshell, compost promotes biologically active and diverse soil.

Still another benefit of producing compost: Its ingredients are easy to come by. What goes into the creation of compost is often the result of the farm's production. Compost is made from a combination of many available ingredients—be it garden scraps or kitchen scraps.

Composting is also an economically sound practice. Instead of sending waste to a landfill, it's recycled and reused. The farmer also sees a reduction in the need to buy other fertilizers and pesticides. The nutrients present on the farm stay on the farm, and they continue to nourish and benefit its future.

Page 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

About the Author: Horticulturist Jessica Walliser can be heard every Saturday from 12 to 2pm EST on Sirius satellite radio channel 114 where she co-hosts "The Organic Gardeners." For more on organic growing, check out her new book, *Grow Organic: More Than 250 Tips and Ideas for Growing Flowers, Veggies, Lawns and More* (St. Lynn's Press, 2007).