

# Composting can reduce waste by 30 per cent

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Marion Kester is a Georgetown resident currently attending the University of Waterloo where she will graduate next year with a Bachelor of Environmental Studies degree with a matching Bachelor of Science degree in Biology. She will be submitting a monthly column over the summer months dealing with environmental issues, particularly recycling, in Halton Hills.

By MARION KESTER  
Herald Special

When I was a child I would follow my grandfather around as he went about his daily rituals. One particularly interesting ritual he had involved depositing kitchen waste onto a huge pile in his backyard. Grass clippings and leaves were also added and occasionally he would turn the pile over with a pitchfork.

One day he told me that he would eventually use the material in this heap to help his flower and vegetable garden grow. As most things in life, I understood much later what he meant. In essence, this was his compost pile and what he had taken from nature he had given back to the soil as a beneficial ingredient.

Composting is simply the breakdown of organic materials by soil micro organisms into a soil-like humus. Finished compost is a soil conditioner which enhances a soil's ability to retain nutrients and moisture. With nearly 30 per cent of our residential waste stream made up of organic waste, leaves, grass clippings and food waste, composting has become an increasingly attractive waste reduction technique. Coupled with our current blue box program, a minimum of 50 per cent of our household solid waste can be diverted from landfill sites. By diverting this waste we are saving infinite natural resources as well as decreasing the cost of transportation.

To date, several communities across the globe boast about their efforts at composting. Germany has a Green Can program where householders separate waste into two components, wet and dry, and place it in separate cans. The dry material is the equivalent to our

blue box program and the wet material is composted at a central facility to make fertilizer for nurseries, vineyards, and parks. The remaining portion of waste, as little as 35 per cent of the total generated, is landfilled. Due to the simplicity of the program, participation rates are as high as 95 per cent and the cost of collection is kept low.

In New Jersey, the legislature has recently passed a law which requires all of its counties to compost leaves as well as recycle at least three other materials. To reinforce this law, the Senate has passed a bill banning leaves from landfill sites.

Since there exists no comprehensive community composting program in Halton, the onus falls on individual households to maintain their own compost heaps.

The reasons why more people don't have compost heaps in their backyard range from the odors emitted by them to the notion that you need a big backyard to carry out the practice. Both excuses are a result of ignorance toward this method of recycling.

Apart from the benefits of compost already mentioned, there exist two others. First, compost helps prevent the erosion of top soil, something other fertilizers can't do. Also, compost has an advantage over liquid chemical fertilizer because it releases nutrients to the soil gradually whereas the latter are washed from the soil quickly.

You don't have to be a dedicated or expert gardener to create your own compost. All you need is a few square feet in your backyard and four basic ingredients necessary for the decomposition process to take place. These are: organic material, air, moisture and soil. Organic material suitable for your pile includes: vegetable and fruit peelings, coffee grounds, tea leaves, egg shells, leaves and grass clippings. Barbecue grill residues can also be added in limited quantities. Shrubbery prunings can be added but must be cut into smaller pieces to facilitate decomposition.

Do not include items such as meat and dairy products because they tend to smell as well as at-

tract animals. Yard waste treated with pesticides or herbicides are also not advised because the chemicals contained within them harm the micro organisms in the compost. Rhubarb stems and walnut shells should not be added because they too contain chemicals toxic to soil microbes.

Air circulation is also vital to the success of your pile. Your compost enclosure can be as simple as an ordinary garbage can or as elaborate as a custom made wooden box.

There is a generally accepted technique to building a compost heap. Begin with a layer of soil on the bottom. This is necessary to give your compost contact with valuable micro organisms that set the decomposition process in motion. To this initial layer, dry and wet layers of material are added in thicknesses of between 3-6 inches. Water should be added if the weather becomes particularly dry and if your pile is too wet, it should be turned more often with a pitchfork and absorbant material should be added.

With each layer of waste, add a thin layer of soil, this keeps the pile looking relatively attractive.

You'll know your compost is finished when it looks like rich, dark earth. There will probably still be traces of egg shells because they are the last to decompose however you don't have to wait until they're done.

Finished compost can be freely added to flower and vegetable gardens to enhance the soil's ability to hold nutrients and water. Generally, you can expect to have finished compost twice a year; once in the early summer and once in the fall. During the winter months you can continue to add organic material to your pile. This material will freeze and as the weather warms up in the spring decomposition will once again begin.

We presently exist in a world where increasing production of solid waste is coupled with a dramatic decrease in landfill capacity. Curbside recycling and composting practices are two ways in which individual efforts on a local level work toward guaranteeing the survival of future generations.



PEI bound

Reverend Chris McMullen has been at St. John's United Church for the past year as minister of Christian Education but he and his wife Valda leave for Prince Edward Island soon, where he will serve a three point charge. (Photo submitted)

## ASK KATHY

Dear Kathy:

Does stress slow weight loss?

Reply:

Stress may have a large impact on your ability to lose weight. For example, if you are a busy executive, your schedule may cause you to eat irregularly. This erratic eating leads to serious overeating at night, when your energy needs are at their lowest, which can cause you to gain weight.

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KATHY HAJAS  
Diet Center Counselor

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## Record Oil Spills

(not including 1989 Alaskan tanker spill)



Source: World Almanac

NEA GRAPHICS

The nation's worst oil spill occurred when the Exxon Valdez ran aground on March 24. There have been many other oil spills worldwide, however. The worst took place in the southern Gulf of Mexico (1979) and in the Persian Gulf (1983). In both cases about 600,000 tons of oil were spilled.

## Home sweet home

The Swedes have lived in present-day Sweden for at least 5,000 years, longer than nearly any other European people.

## Police protection

The average city spends \$85.71 annually per resident for police protection, the largest continuing item in city budgets.

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