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Home-Brewed Compost — With a Twist of Peat

(MS) — Homemade compost — sweet, rich and friendly — can use a helping hand in the garden; horticulturists extend its value dramatically with equally beneficial Canadian sphagnum peat moss.

Backyard composters, whose "product" is their pride and joy, mix leaves, grass clippings, kitchen scraps and anything else they can get their hands on (even weeds) into piles or bins, then throw in a bit of old compost to inoculate and jump-start the decomposition. If the piles are kept aerated and moist, a batch of useable compost can be finished in less than a month.

However, such "hot" composting is hard work and, since composting isn't a race, most folks simply pile it all up, mix it a time or two, and let it simmer slowly on its own for four or five months. It eventually works fine, though some bits may need sifting out to be composted again.

Whether you are a fast or slow composter, the finished product — full of life, dark, crumbly and packed with nutrients — is great for garden soil, and saves money on other soil amendments. However, there can be drawbacks.

Extension horticulturist Felder Rushing, a longtime composter from Miss., claims to be so proud of his home-grown compost, he almost wants to gift-wrap it. "But," he says, "compost alone doesn't cut it. Compost makes my soils sticky and easy to compact, then it quickly disappears, eaten up by microbes. Besides, there's never enough to go around; to keep my three bins working, I have to beat other composters to curbside piles of leaves and clippings, and I still can't

make enough." According to Rushing, even municipal compost, a great trend in recycling that he and other members of the Garden Writers Association actively support, has problems. "I use it, but it's highly variable, hard to haul and store, and may contain oak tannins or other impurities."

What to do? Rushing mixes his compost 50:50 with perfectly complementary peat moss. Even though sphagnum peat moss — especially the dependable, red-brown kind harvested from a tiny portion of literally millions of acres of high-grade sphagnum bogs in Canada — seems a bit pricey compared with homemade or municipal compost, it always has been a staple. It's a given to gardeners, because its universally acclaimed benefits far outweigh the cost. Canadian sphagnum peat moss binds sandy soils, aerates heavy or clay soils, holds moisture and nutrients, and lasts up to eight times as long as compost in the soil. It's also convenient, easy to use, stores well in its compact bag (which can be reused for garden chores) and, just as important, it is "predictable."

It's a win-win solution to soil-improvement dilemmas. Peat moss extends the volume and soil life of compost, and helps reduce soil compaction. It even can be mixed directly into compost bins as new batches are started, where it will help aerate the pile while grabbing and holding water (which is released slowly as needed, saving water and time). It traps nitrogen that otherwise would be lost as ammonia, and holds other valuable nutrients that leach from compost.

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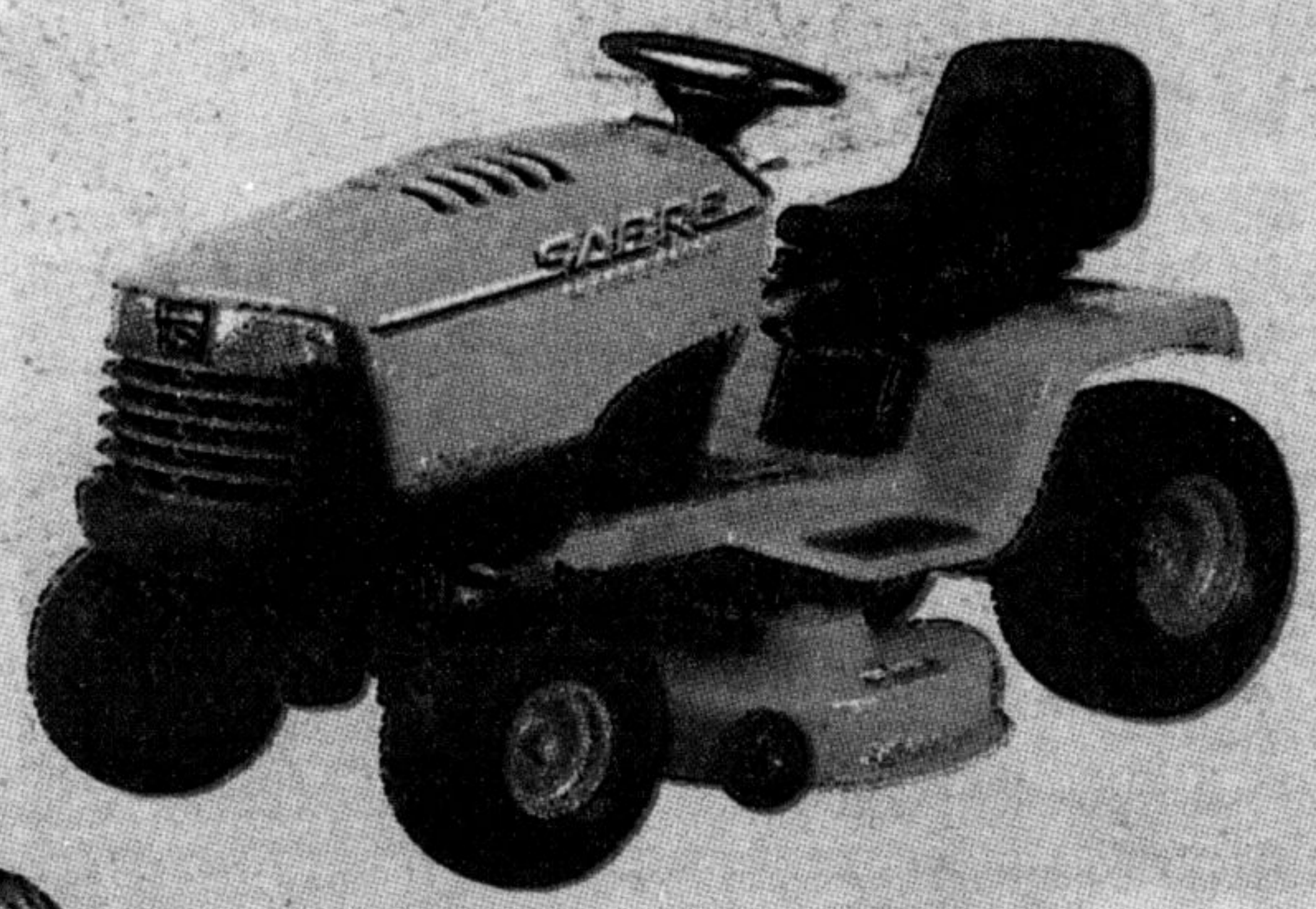
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