

GREEN INVESTMENT – old style

- By Robin Reily



A Rotten Investment

What a profitable venture.... turning spoiled food, wet sawdust, old leaves, and chicken sh*t into a nutritious, organic stimulant. Gardening books prescribe the steps to making the perfect compost pile. There are layers of vegetable

scraps, dried leaves, soil and manure, some straw, all neatly piled like a layer cake. Keep it moist and regularly turned upside down. I've tried to follow this path to enlightenment but alas I always turn astray...just too much work. Instead, I call my inner 'degrading' journey 'calm-posting'.

Each spring I gather up a mound of whatever organic matter is readily available and I let it slowly rot away in a dark, remote corner. Often it's wet straw or the refuse from cleaning the chicken coop, add in last year's leaves and mulch removed from raised beds. That's all piled into a box made from pallets to make the new heap. Beside that box is another half rotten pile from last fall and a third well decomposed from last spring. This approach takes much longer than the idealized approach but you end up with the same result with less effort.

Deep inside the compost pile, fungi and bacteria break down carbon molecules to release a variety of minerals and compounds. The carbon is concentrated in leaves and stems, even paper and sawdust, to break it down you also need nitrogen...maybe manure or fresh cut grass.

Without nitrogen nothing much happens...the pile just doesn't heat up. If our pile seems a bit sluggish, I add a concentrated nitrogen source like purchased blood meal or liquified fish or fresh manure.

There also needs to be a good air supply...turning the pile over does this well and if I had a tractor, I might do that...but using the 'calm' approach, I rely on the slatted pallets and jabs

with the garden fork each time I add kitchen scraps. Fungi and bacteria consume the organic material and then secrete nutrients. By mixing one quarter of last year's compost into the new pile I'm sure of a plentiful team of decomposers.

The pile is a great place to blend in other nutrients. I blend in our winter's wood ashes so that the phosphorus, potassium and trace minerals are available. For the new year's plants, it's best to avoid putting these directly into the growing beds, instead spread them onto an active compost pile and let them mellow for a year. We've grown some plants partly just to build the compost pile. Sorghum aka Sudan grass quickly grows up to three meters high shading out weeds. When cut in fall, the vast root system builds the soil from below, while the carbon rich dry leaves and stalks add carbon to mix with the

nitrogen from our sheep, pig and chicken manure.

If you are only trying to produce a pail of rich compost per year you could do that with a tub of red wiggler worms. If you're only hoping for a wheel-barrow of compost then maybe look into one of those rotating barrels to mix up and aerate your kitchen scraps. If you have a tractor and mounds of manure-laden

straw regular mixing is an option. I'm content to 'calm-compost' by waiting at least a year. Rather than 'trash-talking' the fungi and bacteria for not frenetic biting carbon-chains, I patiently wait for them to work their magic at a relaxed pace.



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