

Thursday, May 24, 2007



Photo by Joshua McKerrow

Dr. Frank Gouin, retired chairman of the University of Maryland Horticulture Department, turns a fork full of compost in a homemade bin in his Deale garden. He spent years of research on the wonders of compost, from its nutrient and fungicide value to its use in stormwater management.

Composting has benefits beyond the garden

[By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer](#)

After cutting the lawn for the second, maybe third, time this spring many weekend warriors dutifully bag up the clippings and set them out on the curb for county pickup. Ditto leaves in the fall. But one of the simplest techniques, as old as, well, dirt itself can turn that yard waste into a wonder.

Compost.

Nutrient-rich and chock full of natural fungicides, it can turn a lackluster garden into a blooming paradise.

That was the message behind International Compost Awareness Week celebrated in the U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom this month.

Here in Anne Arundel there are people composting in backyards, as well as companies turning it for profit.

Treated right and left to do its thing, leaves, grass, kitchen and garden scraps turn into living compost that plants just love. But that is not all. Large-scale efforts can save tons of otherwise useful material from ending up in landfills.

These days when you can find rows and rows of weed killer/fertilizer/insecticide marketed to

make your lawn look like a Pebble Beach golfscape, composting can seem pretty outdated.

"It's too simple, not technical enough," said Dr. Frank Gouin, of Deale, former chairman of the University of Maryland horticulture department. "But it works if people would just practice it."

He delighted in showing how simple it is, turning a pile of what was leaves last December with a pitchfork, sporting his "Compost Happens" T-shirt. He reaches in for a fistful of dark compost, left to cook a little more it would become hummus, the richest of soils, alive with beneficial organisms.

He works two batches of compost, one in his garden using leaves and other scraps and another large batch with horse manure he uses across his 14-acre farm along Rockhold Creek to grow Christmas trees, peaches, and persimmons.

He has been working with compost for years. In 1972 he developed a plan to take the solid-waste effluent sewage from treatment plants and create agricultural-grade compost. He later worked on legislation requiring Maryland counties to recycle yard waste.

In Anne Arundel last year, about 67,500 tons of yard waste was collected in curb-side pickups. The projection for this year in 70,000 tons.

Some of that is composted at the Millersville landfill facility and sold in bulk to landscapers and nurseries. There is also a mulch giveaway program for homeowners and community groups.

"In addition to the environmental benefits, it is cheaper to compost the material than to bury it," said David Abrams, spokesman for the Department of Public Works.

Dr. Gouin also developed composting programs for Prince George's and Montgomery counties, Disney World, and the Katawba and Cherokee tribes.

He takes leaves, garden and kitchen scraps and piles them into a frame built of scrap wood that allows air to circulate through the mix.

To get it started he takes a 5-gallon bucket puts some rich garden soil in it and fills it with water. He then adds 1/2 cup of liquid dish detergent, "the cheapest you can find" and a cup of urea. Pour that on the pile to get it cooking.

"The compost needs about 40 percent moisture to work," he said.

The best way to test it is to grab a handful out of the middle of the pile. If it feels like a wet sponge that has been rung out, that's the ticket.

Compost will literally cook. Once the enzymes get going a pile of compost can reach

temperatures around 140 degrees. He said he had once used a dozen barrels of compost to heat one of the buildings at College Park.

Commercial composting uses a variety of materials, including yard waste collected by local governments.

At Chesterfield Farms in Crofton proprietors Marsha and Alan Boehm have piles of compost in various stages, some 30 feet high, spread around a 6.5 acre site.

"We make a variety of different products, many to specifications for our customers," Mr. Boehm said.

It is used by landscape companies for lawns and gardens. Developers use it for bio-retention projects on sites and for storm water management too. The company often gets orders from landscape architects for specific applications. It now processes about 15,000 tons a year.

Front end loaders take scoops of the raw materials and dump it in shredders which helps get the material to a uniform size, ready to cook. After it starts to cook it is put into longer rows. Soon the Boehms will use commercial plastic tubes and blow the compost into it. The plastic will retain needed moisture and cook the compost faster.

Mr. Gouin has experimented with a myriad of uses for compost, outside of agriculture or gardening. On construction sites he says mature compost, with its nutrients cooking, can be used on the outside of storm water fencing to remove clay particles from runoff.

He said the technique is being used at Annapolis Town Center in Parole.

"Mother Nature does a damn good job if you can work with her," Mr. Gouin said. "It is the ultimate in recycling."

For more information visit the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Web site's Home and Garden Information Center at www.hgic.umd.edu.

Published May 23, 2007, [The Capital](#), Annapolis, Md.
Copyright © 2007 [The Capital](#), Annapolis, Md.