

Common Sense Compost Making

When talking about Compost I am immediately going to mention things that fit neatly into a scientific system that is part of this time, and also times past part of which borders on herbalism and magic. I ask that whilst listening that you suspend critical function until you have received the whole picture, afterwards 'believe nothing', but think and feel for yourselves and then perhaps experiment and subject your own findings to a personal statistical review.

For the new era an acronym helps things to sound modern. So I'm going to coin GETS, which stands for Garden Energy Transfer System, or to most people a compost heap.

The idea is of course as old as horticulture, but the relativity of the concept is in the understanding. In 1908 Dr. Rudolph Steiner, he of Steiner schools fame, was asked by students to discourse on ideas on agriculture. The series of five lectures he gave has at the end of the 20C. Given rise to the Bio Dynamic school of Agriculture that along with the Soil Association in this Country was the first to foster so called Organic methods of producing food. These lecture are in the public library system and are well worth reading. Steiner was a man born on a higher intellectual plane than the rest of us. He had access to a level of intuition and knowledge beyond us. He also cloaked a lot of what he said in a layer of Hocus-pocus that will give any one of modern scientific upbringing immediate mental indigestion.

In the 1940's Mrs Bruce wrote a little book called "Common Sense Compost by the Quick Return Method" She donated the Copy write to the Soil Association. She had bumped into the Steiner method and decided to experiment with the plants and the techniques to see whether it could be de-mystified. Steiner had some materials buried for twelve months in a stag's stomach. For those who have read this little book it can be intellectually revolutionary. A précis of what it says may be in that old country saying, "The answer lies in the soil." To a certain extent the wisdom of this was ruined in the 50's by Kenneth Williams on the comedy show "Round the Horn." It is however a universal truism.

The premise by which all-modern agriculture works is exactly the opposite of the above. It treats soils as a supporting mechanism for roots, and little else is of importance beyond water retention and heating characteristics. All our modern dilemmas of whether Genetically Modified Organisms go back to the replacing of the belief in soil Quality, for that of a false conception of Control. Three generations have gone by since the start of this and no Grandparents are available to cry Hold. The Soil associations original formation was just such to fight against the stupidity of belief in Control. The opposition, led then by

Commercial interest and scientist of the end justifies the means school, quickly daubed them with the epithet of Muck and Magic, and polarisation has continued unabated ever since.

What Miss Bruce proposed was a method where every small gardener where ever they are in the world could generate enough Compost by returning vegetable matter alone back to humus through a compost heap. She used the plants that Steiner had proposed. These were Stinging Nettle, Yarrow, Dandelion, Camomile, Valerian, Oak Bark and Honey. By experiment she discovered that the dried essence of these plants activated in rainwater, and used homoeopathically to activate a compost heap, had actions and significance far beyond normal expectations. Modern Scientist to this day is sceptical about homeopathy. More on this later.

If you consider a piece of land that is used for say pasture, and think about what happens in a twelve month period, where it is left alone by man. In spring grass and all the other plants start to grow and strive during the next season to reproduce and establish themselves and their offspring. Autumn arrives and seed production followed by shedding of leaves where appropriate, and then die back in winter. The following seasons growth will come up through the small thin mulch of last season's growth. Earthworms and other agents, slugs snails beetles, etc. will help turn this litter into humus. This in turn holds moisture and acts as food for soil microbes whose life and death cycle leads to nutrition of the plants above. The process as nature has set it up requires time and no cataclysmic disturbance, as represented by mans agricultural activities, to work with any degree of efficiency.

As soon as digging or ploughing take place a new procedure is necessary. Agriculture and Horticulture have always been chancy business, where bad weather and bad practice can lead in the worst case to famine. It has been surrounded by superstition since we first started to grow things. Modern superstition is that we can control the processes by which things grow by scientifically balancing inputs. Ancient superstition probably meant a sacrifice. Ancient failures were more spectacular; starving is after all is no-ones favourite past time. It is not therefore a wonder that modern agriculture can point to its success in this feeding of more people. It is easy to make a case for modern methods, but this has led to the loss of hard won wisdom on the management of the land for long term health with perhaps less immediacy in the wealth.

To come back to our garden. If you take all the vegetable matter available, and place it in a heap, it will in time rot down into humus. This process can be vastly improved on.

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I have all ready mentioned the herbs for the making of the Quick return mixture.

These are collected in one season for use in the next season.

These are as follows:

1. Stinging Nettle *Urtica Dioica*
2. Yarrow *Achillea millefolium*
3. Dandelion *Taraxacum officinale*
4. Valerian *Valerian officinallis*
5. Camomile *Matricaria chamomilla*
6. Oak bark *Quercus robur*
7. Honey

These herbs are then dried. I use low slow heat in an oven, beware valerian smells horrible. I store them separately in sealed jars until ready for use. I then mix a teaspoon of each into a separate jar, the honey needs to be rubbed a teaspoon at a time into a teaspoon of dried baby milk, until it is absorbed. This is then used as the raw material for making the liquid that is added to the heap. More later in sequence.

Materials Required

Herbs:

1. Stinging Nettle *Urtica Dioica*
2. Yarrow *Achillea millefolium*
3. Dandelion *Taraxacum officinale*
4. Valerian *Valerian officinallis*
5. Camomile *Matricaria chamomilla*
6. Oak bark *Quercus robur*
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Compost Bin:

Size dependant on area of land to be worked. Maximum of 2.4m². Best size for a garden.

Method

1. Gather herbs in the morning Dry to tinder crush to a powder and pass through a fine kitchen sieve. Store separately in sealed clean jars.
2. Collect material for composting. This may be all garden plants and weeds. *Do not use waste, likely to attract vermin.* If it can be chopped small with a garden spade include it, i.e. hedge clippings. All weeds the more vigorous the greater their potential energy in the heap.
3. Build the heap; base on the earth, layers of material about 10cm, mix grass cuttings with courser material. Cover top layer with an insulator like old carpet. Moisten, do not saturate.
4. Adding the QR mix that is prepared the day before use. Take an equal small amount of each herb mix together in a new jar. From the mix take enough to cover a coin the size of the present 5p piece. Add to 500ml of rainwater from a clean water butt, not tap water, shake well and allow standing for a day, then shaking again. It is now ready for use. With a crow bar bore holes from top to bottom of heap, about 30cm apart. For m² heap in a domino 5 patterns. Pour in about 100ml of QR mix per hole, fill hole with some sieved earth. Cover with insulator material. Cover the whole with a rain shedding "roof" to avoid saturation from rain.

The heaps disintegration into compost is season and temperature dependant. The middle will rot down into "plum pudding" constituency that can then be used straight or sieved for incorporating on the garden. Use as a top dressing when preparing ground, about 1 to 1.5 handfuls per m². This must be chipped or raked into the surface for best results.

Gross feeders can be fed in summer by adding 3 handfuls to a 15-litre bucket stirring well and watering in.

QR mix works homoeopathically in the soil gross applications just cause the energy to be dissipated uselessly.

Source for further reading: M. E. Bruce, author of Common Sense Compost Making by the quick return method. ISBN 0 571 09990 4. Copyright to the Soil Association