

September 30, 1995

SARE GRANT 3FNE94-58 FINAL REPORT

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED COMPOSTING

"The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden.....;" and the gardener, bending near, or walking the fields, hears. He hears the silent sprout rise out of the seed, the seed turn slightly in soil, the soil particles part as the plant emerges.....and he also hears what went before: hands sowing the seed, the sound of tillage, compost being spread onto the growing bed, materials of the compost heap heating and breaking down, the materials-- manure, straw, greens, garlic stems, shells and scraps-- heaped into windrows.

"Behold this compost! Behold it well!" It is natural that we inherit and repeat the voice of Walt Whitman, here on his native Paumanock. In fact, the words of "This Compost," carefully transcribed by farmer Tim Laird, surround the farm map that we distribute to Quail Hill CSA farm members. We like to remind members and visitors that the health of the field begins with compost preparation. In a few years time we have brought life back into an overworked field, primarily through rotation, cover cropping, and tons of homespun compost.

I heard Will Brinton (of Wood's End Lab, Mt. Vernon, Maine) introduce the idea of Community Supported Composting at the annual Community Supported Agriculture meeting held in Kimberton, January, 1994. Excited by this concept (and crazy about compost) we at Quail Hill developed a proposal and applied for a grant from SARE (The Northeast Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program). Our community farm seemed the logical place to develop a community composting project, and to stimulate public awareness of the natural cycle of renewal, as the earth "turns harmless and stainless on its axis." Such a project can assist the small farm to build and manage a quality supply of compost, and to find a low cost method to recover nutrients lost when vegetable crops are harvested.

Quail Hill Farm is a Community Supported Agriculture project of the Peconic Land Trust. Two farmers, who are also employed as stewards for other land preserved or protected by the PLT, raise a variety of vegetable crops, berries, and apples on about 20 acres of conservation land. We employ, and instruct, three apprentices for the growing season. About 12 acres are presently in a vegetable rotation. We use cover crops in the traditional ways: for winter cover, as undersowings, for summer cover (and to add organic matter) after an earlier crop has been harvested. Horse manure, the raw material for compost, is supplied by a local riding stable, and then piled, turned and cured in windrows. We usually spread it in early spring, a double dose where we sense the need is. We have ample carbon from our raw material-- woodchips and straw bedding-- so we are always on the lookout for nitrogenous materials, for balance.

Will Brinton suggests that up to 25% of the vegetable material which a farm produces actually leaves the field through harvest. What a loss! Especially if you have inherited a soil which is low in organic matter. The Food Cycler bag offers a way for the small farm to recycle, to actually retrieve some of that valuable organic matter normally lost to harvest. Of equal importance, this project serves to educate; more of the community now become actively engaged in the composting process.

"The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward....." After introducing this composting project to our farm members through our newsletter, we distributed Food Cycler bags at the Quail Hill farmstand. Our members come first to the farmstand, before harvesting their own food, to read the board: potatoes in #5, carrots in #15, tatsoi in #24, zulu flowers for cutting in the valley. Again, we explain the necessity and value of composting, and we invite our members to fill the Food Cycler bags with scraps, and to return these bags on the next harvest day (Tuesdays and Saturdays). When the tractor with front-bucket is available, we leave this parked by the stand, to collect the returns. More often we simply provide a few boxes, then transport these to the windrow, to be covered. A number of members seem to enjoy a personal visit to the compost heap. If any members are shy of handling rotting vegetable matter, we have yet to hear the complaints. During the Winter Share period, when we distribute stored vegetables from the farm shop, we provide a drop-off bin near the shop. We include a few bags (per week) with the take away box of food. In the course of the farm year we have distributed about 1500 bags. Using Woods End Lab's calculations, we have collected 12,000- 18,000 pounds of food scraps, all to be returned to our fields in the form of compost.

Two local stables, with a need to dispose of bedding and manure, have cooperated with us in this composting project; they bring the raw material to our compost site, then we shape the windrows, and turn it a number of times. We also distributed large Food Cycler bags to two restaurants who are members of our community farm, though neither seemed able to fit the bags into a workable routine. Instead, we assist "Estia" and "Nick & Toni's" to make compost heaps in garden space adjacent to them; this compost is returned to vegetable gardens which we help them to plan and plant.

Mid-season we held an open day at Quail Hill, with Will Brinton on hand to illuminate all those curious about compost. In response to Will's instruction and suggestion that day, we screened compost which would become the basis for our seed starting mix. Wood's End Lab's analysis of various compost samples collected at Quail Hill Farm is attached to this commentary. Will Brinton notes that the samples "appear to have high quality as far as growing media is concerned," showing a "very balanced nutrient disposition."

To other community farmers and gardeners I would stress the practicality and ease of this form of composting, given the space to create it. To involve more people in recycling food insures a community focus on building the health of the soil. Returning leaves and stems, skins and petals to the farm, to the field, an individual is likely to feel the food cycle as the great circle it really is: seed to soil to

plant to fruit to harvest to compost, to soil again. When cared for the circle sings with an energy that may harmonize with that of the sun. The author of "Leaves of Grass" admits to be "terrified at the Earth," but as he withdraws he sees the "annual, sumptuous crops. He does not hesitate to speak of the shadow side of matter, with emphasis: "Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead?" Whitman can waken us to the wild beauty of raw materials with words that pinch, but to enter into the community of seed, soil, vegetable, animal and human, we need to see, seed, harvest, prepare food, to compost.

One walking through our early autumn leaves of grass would find a full bouquet of buckwheat, millet, oats, vetch, bell beans and red clover all greening in a soil improved by years of compost. Inviting a community to take part in the process we can cultivate lush growth in the simple grasses to feed the earth as well as the one who sows. Of the earth the good grey poet notes: "It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last."

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