



A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Unexpected Joys of Compost

Fall is a good time to set up your home composting system, before the rains come and drive us all back into our nests. Composting is a simple way to recycle your food and gardening waste into beautiful enriched soil that nurtures your plants non-toxically. Plus you can be “part of the solution,” making good use of these nutrients instead of shipping them away to landfills who-knows-where to be buried too deeply to really decompose.

But perhaps you only have a small patio. Can you still compost? Over the past few years, I’ve been exploring just that question, playing with options and seeing what works.

What I’ve learned is that, yes, **even in a small space, you can easily turn your food waste into lush soil**, better than anything you can get in a bag. I’ve been amazed at how well my plants grow in this cultivated dirt! Fertile soil truly is the foundation of healthy gardening.

I also love one of **the unexpected delights of composting — plant volunteers**. Just this year my compost has given me strawberry plants, squash, and a forest of cantaloupe sprouts, which have then filled their own containers with abundance. Their vibrancy shows me just how nourishing my compost has become.



Setting Up Simple Composting

If you want a simple basic backyard composting setup, here’s all you need — a container, some starter dirt, a trowel, food scraps, and worms. Oh, and a few tips to help it all work smoothly, which follow now.

(1) Select your container(s). You can start with any container (say one foot across and one foot high) with drain holes. At some point, you’ll want to figure out how you’d like to harvest your enhanced soil. You can just start a second container and stop adding to the first.

Or, when you know more about the features you want, you can buy or build a fancier setup, with trays for different levels of “doneness,” lids, wheels, and more.

Look at Harmony Farm Supply for options (823-9125, <www.harmonyfarm.com>). Also, North Bay Corp. offers a Smith & Hawken composter at cost to anyone in this area (586-5547, <www.unicycler.com>; look under any Service Area).

(2) Choose your spot. Find a convenient location, near your kitchen and a hose. Add a few inches deep of starter dirt, say from the ground or unneeded potted plants. Water it. Put a trowel nearby to regularly stir it.

(3) Add worms. This is the secret to composting in a small space. Worms love feasting on food scraps and thus turbocharge the process! Find some in your yard or at a friend’s; look on freecycle.com; or call Sonoma Valley Worm Farm at 996-8561.

See COMPOSTING, over

China’s Toxic Shadow

Like bugs scuttling out from under a lifted rock, a stream of stories this past year have been steadily revealing the toxics hiding in Chinese-made products that are part of our everyday lives.

Americans were shocked this spring to hear about pet deaths being linked to Chinese toxics found in pet foods. The result was a recall of millions of mainstream cat and dog food containers.

But that was just the start of the tale, as diethylene glycol (an industrial solvent used in antifreeze) was discovered in Chinese cough syrup and toothpaste; unapproved drugs and additives were tested in seafood; and lead was found in children’s jewelry, lunchboxes, and bibs.

At first, China sought to evade inquiries, probably to protect their billions of dollars in food and other exports. Then, in June, China took some action and shut down 180 food factories, after inspectors found industrial chemicals (such as formaldehyde) being used to make candy, pickles, crackers, and more. “These are not isolated cases,” the government said, a change from past assertions that violations were the work of a few rogue operators.

The enormity of what’s being revealed is highlighted by news of a Chinese executive committing suicide and an official being sentenced to death when improprieties were found. The Chinese government has announced a variety of new regulations and procedures.

The most recent news waves reveal lead paint in Chinese-made toys, with millions of products by Mattel, Fisher-Price, and others being recalled, including the iconic Big Bird and Elmo.

Lead paint in children’s products is a problem that Americans thought we’d addressed back in 1978, when it was largely banned because children so often chew on their things. Even trace lead exposures can wreak havoc on a child’s developing brain, reducing IQ and causing learning disabilities and behavior problems. Severe lead

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(4) Gather food scraps. Set up a container in your kitchen. (I use a 32-ounce yogurt container near my sink.) Don't add meat, milk, or other foods that spoil quickly, as they can smell up your kitchen and attract critters to your outside bin. I also avoid tough materials that break down poorly, such as corn cobs and husks.

(5) Combine, water, and stir. Put your food scraps periodically into your compost bin, covering them with dirt. Only put in an amount your container size can reasonably absorb. Water the soil regularly, to keep it moist and the worms happy. Periodically turn the dirt to keep everything well-distributed. Add dirt if needed. You can also add modest amounts of

leaves, hay, and other "green" and "brown" natural material. Avoid anything too hard, such as branches.

(6) Harvest your luscious soil. Over time, you'll see amazing amounts of food disappear as your composting soil gets darker and richer. When you want to harvest soil, you can either dig around to find dirt without food in it, or stop adding food to that container. Use your enriched soil to pot new plants, or sprinkle it over the dirt in existing pots to add nutrients. (If some worms get transferred too, it's OK!)

There are many approaches to composting. To find out more, see TNS I/6; look in books or online; or call the Master Gardeners, 527-2608.

Curbside Composting

You can also contribute food waste to Sonoma County Compost by placing it in your green yard waste container.

All vegetable food waste is welcome, plus relatively dry foods like bread and pasta. (I put my tough things in here, such as corn cobs and husks.) Don't include meat, bones, cheese, or oil. If you want to keep your container clean, you can put food in a brown paper bag. Just don't put in plastic bags or other garbage.

For more information, contact the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency's EcoDesk at 565-DESK (3375).

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poisoning can cause vomiting, diarrhea, convulsions, anemia, appetite loss, headaches, coma, and death.

Nancy Nord, acting chair of the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), said: "There is absolutely no excuse for lead to be found in toys entering this country. It is totally unacceptable and it needs to stop.... This agency is going to take whatever action it needs to take to address that problem aggressively."

Unfortunately, the CPSC has little staff or funding to follow through on these bold words, as its budget has been systematically attacked by "business-friendly" politicians. Its questionable lunchbox testing methods recently also undermine its credibility. CPSC largely places responsibility for safety on manufacturers. Dr. Michael Shannon, a Harvard Medical School pediatrician and toxicologist, says, "Frankly, I think the biggest story is the clear failure of federal agencies to protect us. I'd call it a public health disaster."

This story also reveals the dark side of our rush into outsourcing and globalization. Sadly, we often find lower prices overseas at the cost of shockingly low wage rates, dangerous working conditions, environmental harm, and minimal regula-

tion, in countries where fewer liberties make it harder for people to uncover the truth, let alone take action.

So what can we do? Unfortunately, there are no quick solutions, but there are ways we can support positive systemic changes and help protect everyone's well-being.

■ **Check recall announcements and warnings for any toys and products** you might have purchased, even in previous years.

■ **Seek out non-Chinese products, especially those made in America with non-toxic features.** This is possible, but can be challenging. China now makes 80% of the world's toys, and made 15% of the \$1.7 trillion in goods the U.S. imported in 2006. A new book, "A Year Without 'Made in China'," describes the challenges one family faced in trying to avoid Chinese products. Also, Chinese ingredients can be included in American-made products.

■ **Don't buy products on price alone.** Our drive for the cheapest products can pressure companies to cut corners. Lead paint is cheaper, after all.

■ **Insist that the federal government ensure that dangerous products do not reach American**

consumers. Better testing, regulation, and labeling are likely required.

■ **Consider testing your child for lead**, if you feel they've been exposed or are having the correlate mental or behavioral symptoms. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says, "There is no acceptable level of lead exposure for a child."

■ **If your company's products include Chinese components**, consider increasing inspections and testing to proactively avoid problems that can impact your sales and reputation.

For more action information, see <www.healthyworld.org/china.html>.

ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. STEP is a project of the **City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. **STEP's mission** is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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