



Urban Harvest

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## Large-Scale Composting For Scavengers

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There's nothing like a thick layer of organic compost spread in the garden to drive any thoughts of chemical fertilizer from the gardener's mind. Rich, dark, crumbly compost is a delight to work with; its main drawbacks are that it is expensive if purchased, and there never seems to be enough to go around. Fortunately for Houston gardeners on a limited budget - and those who know store-bought compost never seems as nice as the home-made stuff - a weekend's labor can result in a vast supply of the best soil amendment possible. An earth-friendly spin-off of your labors is that you can help address the critical and growing problem of landfill overcrowding.

HPD's stables, home of the mounted division, are located just west of the West Loop on North Post Oak between Memorial and Woodway. As you might expect when the stalls of over forty horses are cleaned daily, this facility generates a vast amount of horse manure, wood shavings, and spoiled hay. Regrettably, the vast majority of this ideal compost material is hauled to the landfill. Fortunately, the police encourage gardeners to stop by and help themselves.

There's a large construction dumpster just inside the front gate of the stables that a steady stream of less-than-thrilled probationers feed with wheelbarrows. Transferring the contents of the dumpster to your trailer or truck is the responsibility of the gardeners, so this is a good time to have an enthusiastic group of youngsters involved with your garden. If you're going to go to the bother of making this expedition, get as much manure as your back will stand. Chances are there will be some nylon feed sacks and binder twine that will need to be picked out, so if you weren't raised on a farm, you might want to wear gloves. Personally, I don't find the odor of fresh horse manure offensive - but the flies can be a bit of a bother. Rubber boots are recommended, but if yours have steel shanks in the sole you will soon learn that this organic material is both figuratively and literally "hot" when fresh. Hopping out of the dumpster every few minutes for a break will spare you the unique sensation of an organic hotfoot.

The other ingredient needed for a world-class compost heap is aged, double-ground wood chips or other high carbon, low nitrogen plant material. Suitable wood chips can sometimes be obtained free for community gardeners *only* through HL&P or Bartlett Tree Experts. Another option is the excellent "native mulch" from Nature's Way Resources, Inc. Probably the best plant material for a large-scale compost heap is a spoiled (for feed) large "portable haystack" haybale, which can be gotten very cheaply or for free in the country, but transporting one to your garden can be a headache. Since our objective is a relatively large quantity of compost, figure on at least seven or eight yards of plant material and your compost committee should snare as much manure as they can transport.

Although most references recommend not doing so, it is almost inevitable that weeds and the stalks, leaves, and vines of diseased vegetable plants will wind up in the compost heap. Many of the problems that can arise from composting this dubious material can be alleviated by using it as the core of the compost heap, which is why the end of a growing season is a good time to start a fresh heap. When you wearily drag yourself back to the garden from the stables with (at least) several yards of manure, the accumulated plant trash from cleaning the beds in preparation for the next planting should be piled as far as possible from the beds. Completely cover this pile of Johnson grass and tomato vines about a foot deep with manure and soiled hay; Voydell Smith, an Alabama Community Gardener of considerable experience, avows that the fresh horse urea that the stable waste is soaked in will "burn" weed seeds and diseased plant material that might otherwise cause problems when compost is applied to the garden. The next layer, also about a foot deep, should be wood chips. This layering will eliminate any odor problems from the manure; repeat the layers until you run out of raw materials, and make sure that the final layer is wood chips. The ideal heap should be about 10-12 feet wide at the base and about 5 feet wide at the crown. If you have enough raw material for a larger pile, make a ridge of the recommended width instead.

If the compost heap is made up strictly of wood chips and manure, moving the pile after a month or so will aerate it and greatly speed the composting. However, if your pile has a "trash" core, disturbing it may keep the suspect materials from being fully composted. Turning over even the most ideal of compost heaps is best accomplished by appointing the most energetic 12-year old in your mentoring program as the chair of the compost committee. A properly sized and layered pile with plenty of wood chips should provide enough circulation to promote the growth of aerobic bacteria even if you never get around to tossing. If you should discover a wet, black, slimy mess at the core of your compost heap, it's a sign that air circulation shut down and the pile went anaerobic. Mix the mess with more wood chips and set aside; it will revert to aerobic decay within a few days and should be ready in a month or so. Using large quantities of unshredded tree leaves, especially oak, in your compost heap is begging for an anaerobic pile.

The pile will begin to heat and compact almost immediately. If the pile is properly constructed the core temperature should reach about 140° within a week or so, and the compost is ready when it cools back down to ambient ground temperature. Some invest in soil thermometers; I prefer the tactile method because it's cheaper. If the compost is still noticeably hot when a bare arm is thrust into it, stick that manure fork back in the shed and find another project.

Following this plan will result in a dozen yards or so of superb compost that otherwise would have gone to the landfill. One problem is the almost inevitable fire-ant infestation; the scavenger's solution to this is finding a pro-gardening manager at one of Houston's coffee shops. Ants cannot stand coffee grounds in large quantities, and coffee waste is an excellent source of nitrogen. Most coffee shops do not have the time or space to keep regular coffee grounds separate from the trash; if you ask the manager of a busy shop to save just the espresso grounds it will make it easier for them to assist you.

Another headache can be transport; for some reason, owners of large, expensive new pickups are often reluctant to get into the horse-poop-hauling business. Most contractors have the phone number of a "trash guy" who will haul anything for a few bucks. In many cases, this will turn out to be an independent entrepreneur who heartily approves of the notion of community gardening and

will haul a load of manure for gas money and a few ripe tomatoes in season - especially if all he has to do is drive the truck or pull the trailer, and the gardeners do all the shoveling.

Which, of course, is the biggest headache about large-scale composting. It's labor-intensive, and a project on the scale being discussed here should not be tackled without at least three strong adults or the juvenile equivalent. You'll have forgotten how sore your back was on a late Saturday afternoon in the springtime when you're putting in your garden and you realize you've achieved a gardener's dream: yards and yards of grade-A compost.