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Composting is hot!

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: One of my licorice gumdrops, ice auger and composting thermometer. (Photo courtesy of Kathy Ross)

Speaking of the symbiotic relationships essential to life on this planet, Donna Haraway writes, “We require each other in unexpected collaborations and combination, in hot compost piles. We become with each other or not at all.” In the same book, she explains that ecosexual activists Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens designed a bumper sticker for her proclaiming “Composting is so hot!” But is it sized to fit on a bike or a car?

I often ponder what they mean as I add to or turn my compost piles. Most times I find a new arrival becoming with something else placed in, attracted to or arisen from the compost heap. This heap is slowly, interactively evolving into humus, which is the final stable form of organic matter. Think of the dark springy duff that seems waist-deep in the Olympics.

Understanding this process is a lifelong effort exemplified by composting alchemists like Karl Hammer of the Vermont Compost Company. He has composted everything from donkey manure to dairy waste and uses chickens, which he claims not to feed, to turn and enrich his piles. His commercial compost operation needs 1,000 chickens on staff.

A friend on Harstine Island also has his compost tended by his chickens, and keeps it exposed in his orchard. He elevates the temperature to 150 degrees for 15 days to kill weeds and seeds, which is a key point of hot composting. It takes him 45 days to produce usable compost, sometimes 90 depending on weather. It would be best to cure it for three to six months after that, but he doesn’t bother.

In winter he uses more chicken and rabbit manure, kitchen waste and coffee grounds to heat it up by stoking microbial activity. His “browns” (in contrast to nitrogen-supplying “greens”) are Timothy hay, leaves and woodchips. He also turns it with a tractor and makes sure it’s adequately moist.

On my smaller scale, I contain the compost in Earth Machine compost bins. Because I don’t have the help of livestock symbionts, I keep the precious nitrogen sealed up in this plastic likeness of a huge licorice gumdrop. I check the temperature with a 3-foot compost thermometer (rarely over 60 in winter) that reaches to the bottom of the pile and turn it with an ice auger. This aerating procedure provides a hearty upper body workout because I’m boring through organic matter and 3 feet of maple leaves.

My kitchen waste is very rich in *Lactobacillus* cultures, because I am always fermenting something. I've noticed that since adding spent fruit steeped in water kefir, retired kombucha mothers and dregs of brine ferments, my pile never smells foul — a common complaint of composting.

Foul odors are a good sign that the process has gone awry. A pile that doesn't breathe invites anaerobic bacteria to stink up the area with hydrogen sulfide emissions. Turning the pile, letting it dry a bit and adding some browns (leaves, woodchips, shredded cardboard) can help.

Because our soil can always use more available calcium, I pulverize eggshells in a Cuisinart and stir them liberally into the compost. Earthworms, which move into the compost as it matures, use the eggshell fines as grit in their gullets, which helps them grind up their food as chickens do. When they pass the eggshells out as castings, they are richer in stabilized slow-release calcium carbonate.

Eggshells also help lower the pH of a compost pile. This favors the microorganisms who do the invisible digestive work; they prefer a neutral pH. Wood ash, as I mentioned last week, has a similar action and also introduces potassium. In warmer months, comfrey leaves can substitute.

Always integrate a couple shovels full of your previous compost to populate your nascent pile with established cultures. Over time, Haraway's "unexpected collaborations and combinations" become accustomed to digesting the familiar refuse of our lives, just as they will return us someday — whether we're composted in Seattle or not.

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