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Tea for two thousand

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Blighted leaves are all this hawthorne bore until three weeks' worth of weekly compost tea sprayings. You see that the newest growth is healthy. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

“Is that safe to get on yourself?” Even conventional gardeners can be a tough crowd for compost tea. I explain that it’s made from regular compost and molasses, and contains only garden-variety compost microbes — but in astronomical numbers. The compost residue makes a tea-colored water that some find worrying, or at least unattractive.

Brown-splotched foliage was the least of my concerns when I began applying compost tea last year. I had plants and trees that were malnourished, and soil that was crumbly and dry.

No matter how much organic matter (horsetail, wood chips, comfrey, nettles, and dead leaves) I added, everything became loose and blew around, and the soil had no tilth to speak of. Some plants became sickly and their yellowing foliage signaled nitrogen or phosphorus deficiency.

I wanted the soil and the mulch cover to interface seamlessly. Worms, arthropods and microbes ought to move freely between them until there was no longer a discernible boundary. This living sponge made the healthiest environment for tree roots and improved water retention over the South Sound’s Mediterranean summer. What I needed was soil life.

I attended a presentation by Dr. Elaine Ingham, one of compost tea’s perennial champions, at the 2018 Northwestern Permaculture Convergence in Toledo, Washington.

Microscope slides of compost microorganisms, diagrams and charts made it all seem so quantifiable. Dr. Elaine’s™ has gone on to brand everything to the hilt. God bless her, because some users are reporting up to 150% increase in crop production, 100% reduction in chemical inputs, and 50% reduction in irrigation volume.

After her presentation, I was a bystander to a conversation with the good doctor about the magic of compost tea. Two regional permaculture designers were swearing by it.

One averred that he had seen it sprayed from a crop duster by a broadacre farmer who used only compost tea on his vast crops. The other, who sometimes sells it at the Olympia Farmers Market, said that she could pull up weeds without effort or tools after a few months of regular application because her soil had become so fluffy.

While this was compelling, I needed further prompting to get involved with the brewers, sprayers and cleaning — to say nothing of the quality compost I'd need to input for optimal results. Eric Fisher's excellent book "Compost Teas for the Organic Grower" was the resource that pushed me beyond pondering and into action. There's enough nitty-gritty in there to jumpstart any practical gardener who's a bit of a dreamer.

Because I didn't trust my own compost yet, I started with Olympia Mountain Fish at the recommendation of Black Lake Organics. It's well cured (duly famous for not smelling like fish) and retains a fair amount of small twigs.

Those twigs become a pain in compost tea. It should be brewed in something that percolates large bubbles through the compost in a mesh bag, while suspended in a chlorine-free solution with some molasses in it to feed the compost bugs. Think of an aquarium bubbler.

Over 24-36 hours of agitation, twigs get out and go on to clog your equipment. The manufacturer lists the compost's ingredients as "compost (yard waste, hardwood chips, fish)", and both its texture and marketing suggest that it's meant to be both mulch and compost.

I found some credible discussions online about using worm castings, of which I've farmed plenty. One of these days I'll try that neat or just add a little to my Mountain Fish stock.

While reading for this column, I found the site www.microbeorganics.com. I think it will satisfy those who are hungry for more science, while providing a laugh for marketing mavens — site author Tim Wilson is right, people are unlikely to call compost tea a "microbe multiplier" and the brewers "bioreactors."

Though I look forward to busting out the microscope when I have such time, for now I am happy to see something great happening to my plants and the soil around them.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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