

RODENT MANAGEMENT 101

by Louise Ditmars & Lynn Marie

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When staff and volunteers at the Compost Education Centre “talk compost”, a frequent question is, “but won’t it attract rats”? Rodents and composting are often linked together in people’s minds, but when proper composting techniques are used, rodent problems rarely emerge.

The three most common rodents that may be detected by homeowners are the Norway or brown rat, the roof rat, and the house mouse. Often, the layout of the neighbourhood is what attracts rodents to the urban environment. Lumber piles, uncontained garbage, and messy outbuildings such as garages and sheds can invite unwanted guests to your surrounding home. Although unlikely to transmit life-threatening illnesses, rodents are generally considered unattractive and have been known to cause damage to structures by gnawing and digging. To avoid rodent issues when composting, follow these simple guidelines:

1. Buy or build a rodent resistant composter

When purchasing a composter, ensure that there are no openings greater than ¼ inch (0.64 cm). Check to see that it comes with a secure lid and base so that rodents cannot tunnel under the bin. The Compost Education Centre sells the Earth Machine, a composter made of durable recycled plastic. It comes with a lockable lid and a perforated plastic base plate which allows for drainage and “compost critter” access, but blocks the entry of tunnelling rodents.

If you are making your own bin out of wood, line the sides and bottom with strong, ¼ inch (0.64 cm) wire mesh and put a solid lid on the top. The Compost Education Centre has free plans for the construction of a one or three bin composting system.

2. Locate your bin away from bird feeders and areas of rat refuge

Another easy way to deter rodents is to site your composting system in the open, away from what we call “rat refuge.” Rats enjoy visiting bird feeders where they can get a quick meal. They also like hanging out around lumber piles, shrubbery, sheds and fences from which it is convenient to dart quickly to your composter. Instead of concealing your recycling system, celebrate it by putting it where you can see and appreciate it.

3. Manage your bin appropriately

Finally, rodents will be less interested in your compost if you don’t cater to their feeding and nesting habits. They love bread and grains, greasy foods, or those containing animal products, such as meat, fish, or dairy products. They are less likely to be attracted to the premiumcompostables, which include fresh fruits, vegetables, coffee grounds, teabags and rinsed eggshells. Cover these kitchen wastes with a ‘brown’ material such as leaves, straw or shredded newspaper, regularly aerate your pile, and keep it about as moist as a wrung-out sponge. An active pile makes an unwelcome home and also produces compost quickly and efficiently!

What if you haven’t employed these techniques and a rodent has managed to find a way into your compost? All is not lost. Your finished compost is still safe to use in your garden after the rodents have been excluded for two weeks. By that time, any potential illness causing viruses and bacteria that have been deposited with the rodent’s feces will no longer be harmful.

For more information on rodent resistant composting, to purchase an Earth Machine composter or the Wingdigger aeration tool, call or visit the Compost Education Centre.



*Earth Machine composter and
wingdigger aerator tool*



The Greater Victoria

**COMPOST
EDUCATION
CENTRE**

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Lynn Marie
Chris Wells

Contact us at

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Wed. to Sat. 10 am to 4 pm
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long weekends
and the month of December

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THE LATEST DIRT

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Monthly Compost Club Workshops

Saturdays 2pm-4pm

Free for Compost Club members, \$5.00 for non-members

Call 386-9676 to register

Seed Saving

Sep. 13

Composting Toilets

Oct. 18

Planning Your Organic Vegetable Garden

Nov. 8

Monthly Composting Basics Workshop

Saturdays 2pm-4pm

Free

Oct 4 Nov 1

Pesticide Free Naturally! Workshops

Wednesdays 7pm-9pm

Admission by donation. Call City Green to register: 381-9995

Intro to Organic Principles and Practices

Sept 10

Fruit Tree Maintenance

Sept 24

Workshops and events take place at the Greater Victoria Compost Education Centre at 1216 North Park Street unless otherwise noted. This schedule may change without notice. Call 386-WORM for confirmation on dates and times.

VOLUNTEER UPDATE AND OPPORTUNITIES

On September 21st at Mt. Douglas Park, the Centre will be hosting it's 3rd annual volunteer BBQ and hike. This event will give us a chance to thank both continuing volunteers and graduates of our latest Compost Educator Volunteer Program (CEP), held on July 19th and 20th.

New CEP graduates have been busy putting their new knowledge and skills to work by fielding hotline calls, staffing community outreach even and will soon be facilitating the composting basics workshops. Volunteers have also been instrumental in revamping our curbside bed, and cobbing the tiered bathtub garden. We were able to thank many of these volunteers at our raspberry social, which also gave us a chance to consume many of the raspberries we harvested this season! So thanks once again to all our volunteers this year!

The following volunteer opportunities are currently available at the Greater Victoria Compost Education Centre:

Architect: The Compost Centre is currently looking for an architect who can help create a new site plan for our location on North Park St. We would like to create a design that makes the best use of our space and incorporates our long-term goals. If you are interested in volunteering your time to help us realize our dreams for the Centre please contact Lynn at 386-9676

Straw Bale Building Project: Join us for some whitewash fun! We are looking for volunteers who would like to help whitewash the walls of our workshop building and assist in preparing the ground for its new floor. Call Chris or Geoff at 386-9676

Spring Ridge Commons: Weed for a worthwhile project! Help us on the corner of Chambers and Gladstone for Fall clean-up: weeding, mulching, and pruning. Call Chris or Geoff at 386-9676

We gratefully acknowledge the core funding support that we receive from the CRD and the City of Victoria. Additional support is provided by the Fernwood Community Association and through the generosity of our Compost Club Members and the residents of Greater Victoria.

WEEDS ARE WONDERFUL

by Chris Wells

Weeds are often seen as invaders of the garden, but by learning a little more about them gardeners can utilize them to aid in the growth of healthy, nutritious food.

Many weeds belong to a group of plants called dynamic accumulators. Dynamic accumulators are plants that absorb and store nutrients from the soil. By adding these plants to compost, using them as mulch, or making fertilizer tea out of them, gardeners can utilize these plants instead of fighting them.

Some of the best dynamic accumulators have the worst reputations as weeds. Here are a list of some plants and what they accumulate:

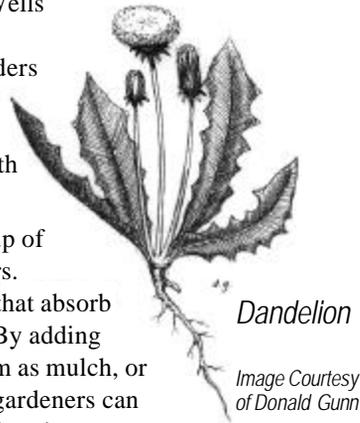
Dandelions accumulate sodium, potassium, iron, silicon, and four other important soil nutrients. **Lambs quarters** absorb potassium, calcium, iron, and sulphur. **Nettles** accumulate nitrogen, sodium, copper, iron and other nutrients, and comfrey accumulates nitrogen, magnesium, calcium, iron, silicon, and potassium. Other great dynamic accumulators are: **Yarrow, Clover, Thistles, Burdock, Borage, and Vetch.**

Adding these plants to compost piles greatly increases the nutritional value of finished compost. As these plants decompose, they release nutrients into the compost in a form that can be easily used by plants. They also help build a diverse population of bacteria, which aid in suppressing pathogens and disease organisms. It is not recommended to add these plants once they have gone to seed (unless composted in a hot pile); however, the seed heads can easily be removed before adding them to the compost.

Using weeds as mulch is also beneficial for the garden. They cover the soil, which traps moisture in the soil in the hot summer months and helps suppress other weeds that are trying to germinate. As mulch, weeds will decompose slowly, adding nutrients and organic matter to the soil as they break down. Also, by letting weeds grow a little bigger than usually tolerated (without letting them go to seed), a great mulch material is easily created.

As a fertilizer tea, weeds are indispensable. By soaking mixtures of weeds in water for four to seven days, you can create a high quality fertilizer for your garden. Soak about a pound or two of weeds in a 5 gallon bucket, stirring it several times a day. Stirring it will create a foam on top of the water, a sign of the biological activity taking place inside the bucket. After 5 or so days the foam will stop occurring and your tea will be ready. Strain it into another bucket using an old pair of panty hose and it is ready to use. Use it at full strength to water your soil, or dilute it to the colour of weak tea to use as a foliar feed. Feed as often as you like, making a new batch each week.

For a list of dynamic accumulators and more information about weed allies, contact the Compost Education Centre at 386-9676.



GARRY OAK RESTORATION PROJECT Volunteers Needed

by Pat Johnston

With less than 5% remaining of what was originally here, Garry oak ecosystems are one of the most endangered ecosystems in Canada. Given the ecosystems are our native heritage, it is imperative that we work towards their protection and recovery.

The Garry Oak Restoration Project (GORP), sponsored by the Municipality of Saanich, Environment Canada, The Garry Oak Meadow Preservation Society and The University of Victoria, Restoration of Natural Systems Program, is one of the organizations working towards the conservation and protection of Garry oak ecosystems. Within the boundaries of Saanich Municipality, ten Garry oak ecosystems sites are being restored.

Volunteers are invited to participate as Restoration Assistants, Site Stewards, Photopoint Monitoring Assistants, Photographers, Community Educators, Web Site Assistants, Historical Researchers and Data Entry Assistants.

Call Pat Johnston, Volunteer Coordinator, at 595-5600 or visit the GORP.

Website at www.gorpsaanich.com for more information.

GARDEN TIP

Rhubarb Saves Broccoli from Club Root

Many gardeners struggle with the issue of club root. Alison, a gardener with a plot next to the Compost Education Centre, has never been able to grow broccoli in her garden because of this problem. This year, she tried an experiment to overcome this, and came up with some good news: rhubarb can help!

Here is what Alison did:

1. Separated nine broccoli starts into a group of four and a group of five.
2. Transplanted the four broccoli starts with a three-inch piece of rhubarb next to their roots.
3. Transplanted the other five broccoli with no rhubarb.

Results: The four starts with rhubarb flourished and produced broccoli- a first for Alison's garden. The five without rhubarb were stunted in their growth and did not produce broccoli.

Lesson: Rhubarb does more than just taste good in pies!

Alison's advice: Look for older books in the library that contain gardening lore- there may be something useful that the "modern" books do not cover.

ENVIRONMENTAL UPDATE ARTICLE:

A New Tool to Reduce Pesticide Use in Our Community

from the Capital Regional District, Roundtable on the Environment



Gardening season is here. For the many CRD residents who have dug out their gardening tools for their favourite season, there is a new tool available this year. The CRD Roundtable on the Environment has produced a guide to pesticide alternatives titled "Playing it Safe: Reducing Pesticide Use in Our Community."

Although this tool won't dig the weeds and rake the grass, it will provide the background needed to make informed decisions on pesticide use in our neighbourhoods. It also provides contact information for gardening and environmental resources within our community.

The brochure outlines many sensible, safe and environmentally responsible choices you can make for your lawn and garden.

Some tips for a healthy garden are:

- Ensure that soil is healthy, well-conditioned with organic compost and has adequate drainage (remember that plants get most of their nutrients from the soil)
 - Plan your garden so that plants are put in areas where they naturally thrive
 - Plant in raised beds
 - Use native plants that are already acclimatized, require low-maintenance and have an in-bred resistance to local pests and diseases
 - Water deeply but infrequently to maintain strong root structure
 - Protect and attract native beneficial species (give them a place to live and a source of water- and they'll do the rest)
- Practise annual crop rotation for each vegetable type (keeps patterns of disease or insect invasion in check)
 - Marigolds and aromatic plants such as chives, dill and mint planted throughout your garden ward off insects and pests

The Roundtable's efforts to reduce pesticide use in our community don't stop at the fences or property lines of homeowners. It is also focusing on public lawns and gardens managed by municipalities in the region. The Roundtable has prepared a Model Municipal Pest Management Policy that can be adapted to the individual needs of CRD municipalities. The purpose of the policy is to develop pest management approaches that eliminate the non-essential use of pesticides on municipal lands.

Many communities across Canada are exploring ways to encourage reduced pesticide use through alternate methods. The Capital Regional District, with its reputation for healthy living and a pristine environment, is aptly suited to be part of this growing trend. The way we choose to manage the pests in our yards is important to the well being of our families and quality of our environment.

To view the guide "Playing it Safe: Reducing Pesticide Use in Our Community" visit the CRD web site at www.crd.bc.ca/rte/toxic.htm. For more information, or to request your copy, call the CRD Hotline.

editor's note: The guide is also available at the Greater Victoria Compost Education Centre, 1216 North Park Street, Wed- Sat from 10-4

THANK YOU FOR YOUR DONATIONS

We wish to extend our sincere thanks to the following individuals for their generosity in donating to the Centre.

D. Greig
L. Miller
N. Gillmor
R. Gillmor
E. Ciceri
Mulvey family
M. Zwicker
de Pagter family
M. Ladouceur



TD FEF funds Straw Bale Floor

A new floor for the straw bale building will soon be constructed, thanks to funding from TD Friends of the Environment Foundation (FEF). The current cob floor of this workshop building is eroded and in need of a more permanent floor to withstand the many people passing through its doors. In 2002, over 2800 people utilized this space while taking part in the Centre's many presentations and schools workshops. Thank you TD FEF, for getting this worthwhile project off the "ground".

THE LATEST DIRT is published quarterly. The deadline for submissions for the fall issue is November 21, 2003. Submissions to the newsletter can be sent to the Compost Education Centre. Unless otherwise noted, articles appearing in this newsletter may be reprinted only in other not-for-profit publications, with the credit given to the author (when named) and **THE LATEST DIRT**.

