

Confessions of a Master Composter

by Fiona Brady

F. Brady/AMNH

On five Tuesday nights this spring, 18 individuals (myself among them) gathered at the Museum to begin training in Manhattan's first-ever Master Composter course. Our varied group included a special-education teacher, a restaurateur, an accountant, a casting agent, a waste-management professional, and several weekend gardeners (and an age range that spanned 40 years). Our goal: to learn all we could about transforming everyday waste into a valuable (and largely overlooked) resource, and to explore how to disseminate that knowledge as widely as possible.



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Cosponsored by the Museum's Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, the Manhattan Compost Project was developed by the Bronx-based New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) and the New York City Department of Sanitation. Situated in the only borough without a botanical garden, the Museum was a most fitting venue in which to immerse ourselves in the minutiae of compost—soil types, aerobic (optimal) versus anaerobic (smelly) decomposition, carbon to nitrogen ratios, bin construction, and the landfill life of guacamole (at least 35 years, according to one study). Weekend field trips took us to NYBG's

various composting sites for some hands-on experience; to the impressive, large-scale composting facility at Riker's Island; and to a local Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) in Queens, where all of Manhattan's collected recyclables go for sorting and distribution.

Over a period of five weeks, we learned a tremendous amount about, well, garbage and the exorbitant price we pay (financially) to throw things away. We learned that composting is a practical and simple way to reduce the quantity of waste that we produce.

The average New York City household throws away two pounds of organic material each day—that's more than a million tons each year...enough to fill a Yankee Stadium-sized Tupperware® container at least once a day. (Add to that the non-compostable/non-recyclable trash that residents and businesses toss out and you could fill it three times a day.)

If we were to remove the heaviest component from our trash pick up, which happens to be the organic material perfect for composting—if *everybody* did—we could significantly reduce both removal costs and the mass of garbage that is placed in landfills or incinerated each year. (Equally positive byproducts would include a reduction of fuel consumed and pollution emitted by transfer vehicles.)

While it's true that organic waste will biodegrade naturally over time, the question is "how *much* time?" Archaeologists who excavate modern landfills, so-called "garbologists," have uncovered decades-old meat, vegetables, leaves—all still clearly recognizable—as well as piles of ancient newspapers that help to date the material. Composting speeds up the decomposition process, and



does it without the smells, seepage, pests, and harmful gasses inherent in landfills.

HOW TO COMPOST

Composting, even in an urban setting, is pretty straightforward, once you know the basics. You can use a variety of receptacles, from a small, apartment-friendly worm bin (they're great...*really!*), to a barrel-sized composter suitable for a building's roof or parking area, to a multi-sectioned holding unit positioned in a corner of the local community garden. For both those preferring a low-maintenance set up or industrious folk who like to turn their compost daily, the result will (eventually) be the same...dark, rich, wonderfully earthy smelling compost.

- You can find out how to buy or build your own bin through the City's botanical gardens, at some nurseries and gardening centers, or via mail order (see resources).
- When preparing food at home, toss compostable scraps into a sealable container.
- When it fills up, freeze the contents over night (to kill any fruit-fly larvae).
- After defrosting, toss the contents into the compost bin, mix it up to keep oxygen flowing through, and cover it with a handful of dry leaves or shredded newspaper.

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composting continued...

- If using a worm bin, just bury the scraps and walk away. (Note to the squeamish: red wigglers, the workhorses of your worm bin, shun the light and forage underground, so you needn't even gaze upon them in your weekly composting routine.)
- *One caveat:* To avoid bad smells and the risk of attracting pests, don't add meats, fish, dairy products, or fats to your compost bin.
- As the finished compost becomes harvestable, it can be used as a top dressing for curbside gardens; placed around trees; added to potted plants; steeped as a tea to spray on roses, lilacs, and tomatoes during their growing season; worked onto lawns to improve soil structure; or donated to local parks or gardens.

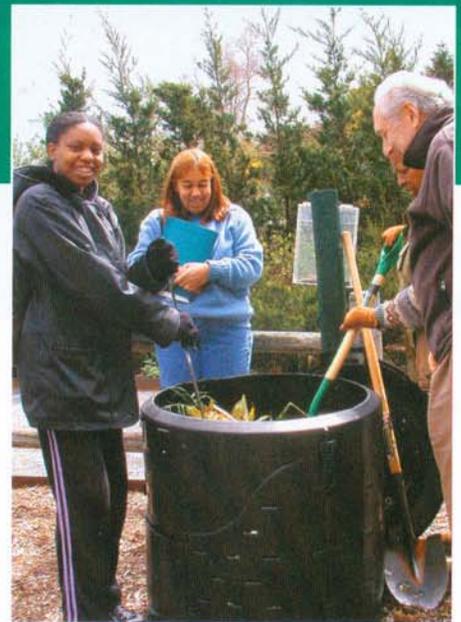
For interested individuals who aren't ready for a bin of their own, kitchen and yard scraps may be welcome at local community gardens and farmers' markets. (The "Worm Lady" at Union Square's market accepts compostables four days a week.)

Here are a few resources for more detailed information on how to get started:

The New York City Compost Project
<http://www.nyccompost.org/resources/index.html>

The New York Botanical Garden
Compost Project
<http://www.nybg.org/compost/index.html>

The Center for Biodiversity
and Conservation
<http://research.amnh.org/biodiversity/>



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Worms Eat My Garbage, by Mary Appelhof.
Kalamazoo, MI: Flower Press. 1982.
ISBN 0-942256-03-4

Let It Rot!, by Stu Campbell. Pownal, VT:
Storey Communications, Inc. 1990.
ISBN 0-88266-635-5