

Composting catches on at many levels

Process turns trash into treasure for many

By Sarah Schneider

Composting adds essential nutrients to soil, but the increasingly popular process also decomposes waste that would otherwise have to be hauled to a landfill more than 80 miles away from Driggs.

Judy Allen, owner of Darby Canyon Gardens, puts a third of her family's trash in the compost pile behind their shed near her garden every day. She has three sections of compost fenced by wooden pallets. She throws scraps in the first section, and once the material loses enough moisture, she then turns it over to the middle section. From the beginning of the process, it usually takes a year for the scraps to turn over to the last section of ready soil. Allen uses the compost in her own gardens but the compost works as fertilizer for her lawn as well.

"Our soils out west have low organic matter, but the compost adds that back," she said.

Allen rents out plots in her garden to neighbors who also add their garden scraps to the compost pile. But because there are so many plots, and the soil takes a year to generate, she has to buy additional compost. But if you're just providing for your own garden or lawn, composting is much cheaper than buying fertilizer, she said.

"You're taking your trash and turning it into something expensive," Allen said.

She said composting is very easy and once you put the scraps in the pile, you really don't have to do anything to it. She suggests using any fruit and vegetable scraps as well as eggshells and coffee grounds. Don't use meat and dairy products or wood or ash. She said grass clippings are great but if weed killer is used on the lawn, watch for the herbicide clopyralid, as it does not break down.

And if you don't have a lot of space for large compost piles, Allen suggests drilling holes in a garbage can in order to aerate the compost, as she did when living in a subdivision.

Allen led a composting workshop Tuesday night at the University of Idaho Extension Office in Driggs sponsored by

The transfer station on Cemetery Road, where the trash is sorted, is now using some of that load to compost on site.

The county chips the wood and brush that comes into the station and typically sells the chips to businesses in the county. This year, they opted to keep the chips to help compost.

Saul Varela, Teton County solid waste supervisor, said the chips would be used to compost animal carcasses received at the station. In 2012, 72 tons of animal waste was brought to the station; mostly from valley butchers, but farmers, hunters and the state police also brought in animals.

The typical practice is to dig trenches and bury the animals, but the county is simply running out of room and the carcasses take a long time to decompose that way.

Varela said the composting program has been approved by the Department of Agriculture but they are waiting on approval from the Health Department to continue. The application with District Seven Health was submitted two weeks ago.

"Our soils out west have low organic matter, but the compost adds that back."

Judy Allen
Master Gardener

Upon approval, the county will pile the carcasses on top of the already buried animals from years past and layer the wood chips over them.

One of the county's main concerns with the program was the smell from the animals. Varela said two feet of wood chips would be layered on the animals in order to draw out moisture and decompose the bodies faster. The temperature has to be kept at 120-150 degrees in order to decompose everything but bigger bones in four to six months.

If properly covered, Varela said there would be no emitting smell.

"We are also very aware that we have a lot of wildlife in this area," he said. "So a main objective is to eliminate odors."

Teton Valley Community Recycling where she demonstrated how to compost and educated students on the benefits of the practice.

A large benefit, Allen said, is you aren't sending your usable waste to a landfill.

Teton County sends on average 23 tons of waste to the Mud Lake Landfill, a hour and a half drive.

Last spring Varela and other county staff members attended a waste management workshop in Boise directed by Cornell Waste Management out of New York. While Varela said he learned much about the practice at the workshop, the county looked to Madison County for a better comparison with higher elevation

Compost continued on A18

Compost continued from A8

and extreme weather. And the program has been successful there.

If Teton County sees success with animal waste composting, Varela said they would like to look into a greens composting program.

"People seem to be doing it a lot privately," he said. "So we would look into that as well."

Allen said many people have started to compost not just for gardening and landscaping purposes, but just to recycle.

And sometimes the mindset to recycle

starts at a young age. Teton Valley Community School in Victor directs a large part of the curriculum to sustainability, especially through the school garden where students learn to compost.

Melissa Young, program administrator for the school, said the students are in charge of everything in the garden from planning to maintaining. The leftover scraps from their lunch are put in the compost pile.

"They learn that we need to help provide the nutrients in the garden in order to sustain the soil," Young said. "And it is important to feed our garden the way it feeds us."