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Sunday, March 26, 2006

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## King of the hill

Associated Press

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Maine has to be the compost capital of the Northeast, if not of the nation.

Touring the trade show floor at New England Grows in Boston for the past few years, it had seemed to me that more than half of the companies selling compost - whether in bags for the home gardener or in bulk for landscapers and garden centers - have operations in Maine.

Part of the reason is the award-winning Maine Compost School - run by the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, the Maine Department of Agriculture and the University of Maine Cooperative Extension - that has a reputation as one of the best in the world. Its students come from all over the United States and the rest of the world, too, including India,

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Because of that school, Maine gardeners have a wide choice in types of composts that can help them grow better flowers and vegetables. Those composts can be made with lobster, crab, salmon and blueberries and sound almost good enough to eat, or they can be made with sewage-treatment plant sludge that's safe for use in home flower and vegetable gardens.

Farmers have been creating compost forever. They create piles of manure, bedding from their animals and vegetation from their gardens, and after a few years when the materials have decomposed, they add it to their gardens.

"Compost is not a soil nutrient," said Mark Hutchinson, an instructor and director of the Maine Compost School, as well as an educator working out of the extension's Waldoboro office. "Compost is a soil amendment. It benefits the soil by helping with the soil structure, how the soil feels, how much moisture is held in the soil, the tilth of the soil."

All of those benefits mean a plant's roots will grow through the soil more easily and more readily pick up the nutrients that are there. And although compost is not a plant nutrient, it does provide some nutrients to the soil.

"The nutrient compost does provide is a slow-release nutrient," Hutchinson said. "It takes two or three years to get



Staff photo by John Patriquin  
George Belmont of New England Organics describes the process for making compost.



Staff photo by John Patriquin  
New England Organics facility manager George Belmont holds a handful of compost made of biosolids from sewage treatment plants and sawdust. Sold as EarthLife, it is available as just the compost or mixed with mulch, peat moss and humus to make a wide variety of products.



Staff photo by John Patriquin  
Steam rises from compost as a loader transfers it for a final screening at New England Organics in Unity.



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that nutrient level to where it needs to be to support the plants. Organic growers who do not use chemical fertilizer get a lot of their nutrients through cover crops and legumes that they till in."

Carlos Quijano, president of Coastal Maine Organic Products, which has its headquarters in Portland and production facilities in Washington County and, to an extent, over the border in New Brunswick, said compost is needed especially around new construction.

"The soil around houses is just awful," said Quijano, who also is an instructor at the Maine Compost School. "The topsoil is removed in construction; what is put back is just junk. The answer isn't Miracle Gro or some chemical fix. Compost will replenish the soil and create a texture that lets plants grow."

Allan Hayes, director of marketing sales support and education for Winterwood Farms in Lyman, said the value of the compost is more than the sum of its ingredients. Lobster and crab shells contain chitin, a chemical that attracts moisture to the soil when it breaks down.

"The compost is slow-release and it creates an environment that encourages beneficial insects and earthworms and is also good for mycorrhizal fungi and beneficial bacteria," Hayes said.

You then have a good atmosphere for the nutrients that will be taken

#### **TOM'S TIP**

I KNOW I told you last fall to clean and sharpen your tools before you put them away last winter. If you are like me, you got busy putting up Christmas decorations and didn't do it.

**DO IT NOW.** If you don't want to sharpen your edgers and pruners, many hardware stores have people who can provide the service.

**AND ONE MORE** thing. I'm beginning my third year of writing this column, and I would love to write about things that interest you. Contact me with any ideas or questions at 791-6362 or at: [tatwell@pressherald.com](mailto:tatwell@pressherald.com)

#### **WHAT ABOUT MULCH?**

**MULCH IS A** different product from compost. First, mulch means two different things.

**THE MOST COMMON** kind of mulch is made from some kind of bark, although sometimes it is made with wood chips or a combination of bark and wood chips. And some mulches made of plastic are being introduced.

**GARDENERS SPREAD** mulch on perennial beds and around shrubs and trees to keep weeds from sprouting and to retain moisture in the soil.

**THE MOST COMMON** complaint about this kind of mulch is that, as the mulch decomposes, it takes nitrogen away from the soil. This is more of a problem with mulches that have a high percentage of chipped wood than those that have mostly bark.

**SOME MULCH PROVIDERS** age their mulch, letting it compost a little bit, so that less nitrogen is taken from the soil after the mulch is spread in gardens.

**YOU ALSO CAN** use compost as a mulch, and it will hold moisture in the soil. But because compost contains more plant nutrients than the straight mulch, there is a higher chance that wind-borne seeds will land on the compost and seed themselves.

**THE OTHER KIND** of mulch is what you put on plants in the fall, to get them through the winter by keeping the soil constantly frozen. Bark mulch can be used for this, but more often people use straw or something similar, which you can buy at farms, garden centers and hardware stores.

up by the plants' roots.

## DEFINING ORGANIC COMPOST

Composting is an organic process, but not all compost is acceptable for use on organic farms.

Eric Sideman, director of technical services for Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, said that many types of composts are approved for use on organic farms. It all depends on what goes into the compost.

Manure from any source is approved. Old produce from grocery stores, leaves and almost anything from a farm would be allowed.

Vegetative material from any source is allowed unless there is a likelihood that there will be a high amount of pesticides. That eliminates compost that includes lawn clippings because it is assumed that lawns will have pesticides, although Sideman said that Woods End Research Laboratory in Mount Vernon does a test that can determine if lawn clippings are pesticide-free.

Most municipal compost operations are not allowed because of lawn pesticides.

"If someone wants to use a compost, we would do a site visit and talk with the people who are making it, find their turning process, a list of all the ingredients," Sideman said. "It has to get warm enough to kill all the human pathogens. It has to heat up to 131 degrees and maintain that heat for three days."

Recipes for compost vary widely. And some of the companies make more than one product.

New England Organics, which has its headquarters in Falmouth

## COMPOSTING SCHOOL

THE AWARD-WINNING Maine Compost School was created in the early 1990s when the state of Maine made a commitment to recycle at least 50 percent of the solid waste produced in the state.

SUITABLE PROPERTY for landfills was getting scarce, the trash-incinerator operations were having technical, pollution and public-relations problems, and open-burning dumps had been outlawed.

ONE OF THE ways to reduce items going to incinerators and landfills was to compost it and spread it on the soil - or ship it out of state.

TO HELP THAT happen, the school was created. The first class was held in 1994."

IT WAS AN interagency team," said Mark Hutchinson, one of the school's three directors, as well as an instructor at it. "The University of Maine Extension, Maine Department of Agriculture, the Department of Environmental Protection and the State Planning Office were the four original members, and they still have representatives in all four groups."

THE SCHOOL TEACHES various recipes for making compost, including the heating process and how to kill weeds and pathogens. It includes field trips to several different composting operations close to Highmoor Farm in Monmouth, where the school is run.

THE CLASS IS run twice a year, this year June 19-23 and Oct. 16-20, and costs \$495 a person. It begins on a Monday morning and ends at noon on Friday. It generally has from 15 to 22 people participating in each session, and students have come from as far away as Australia and India.

CHECK OUT the school's Web site, [www.composting.org](http://www.composting.org).

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Recipes for compost vary widely. And some of the companies make more than one product.

New England Organics, which has its headquarters in Falmouth

and makes compost in Unity as well as in sites in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, makes all of its compost, which is sold as EarthLife, with biosolids from sewage treatment plants and sawdust.

That product is sold as just the compost or mixed with mulch, peat moss and humus to make a wide variety of products.

John Kelly, product manager of New England Organics, said that though it comes from sewer systems, the product is perfectly safe for use, even in vegetable gardens.

"It speaks to the technology and the industrial process," Kelly said, "and 100 percent of that is controlled through a computer - the feed stocks, how much oxygen is given, the amount of moisture - to optimize the compost process."

The product spends up to 65 days in a specialized tunnel, is aerated another 17 days outside the tunnel and then aged for 90 to 120 days on a 10-acre paved area. The product is tested at the end to make sure all the pathogens were killed, that it does not have too much metal and that it meets all of the industry standards.

I can say from personal experience that compost made from sewer sludge works. In the mid-1980s for our perennial and shrub beds, we got pickup truck loads full from a municipal-waste compost facility in South Portland. At that time the processors advised against using the product on vegetable gardens. The plants did great, and my only complaint was volunteer tomato plants from tomato seeds dumped down sinks all over South Portland. But that should not happen anymore.

"We now have 20 years of research behind us at the Hawk Ridge facility, and we are a lot more familiar with the process," Kelly said in explaining that vegetable-garden use is now approved.

Kelly noted that the New England Organics was named national composter of the year for 2004, and Hawk Ridge often is one of the field-trip sites for students at the Maine Compost School.

When I met with Quijano at the Coast of Maine products offices in Portland, he was excited that White Flower Farm, a high-end Connecticut nursery with national catalog sales, had just agreed to sell his products.

Quijano is a former banker who got into the business by taking a contract to process the waste from some Washington County salmon farms. From that project came his first and most popular product, called Penobscot Blend, which is compost made from salmon and blueberry compost, mussel-shell fragments and peat moss.

#### SIMILAR INGREDIENTS, DIFFERENT USES

Coast of Maine now sells a variety of gardening mediums and mulches with similar ingredients, but some are for use as planting mediums, garden soil, soil additives and mulches. All are sold in plastic bags.

"We are presenting the gardener in a way that is user friendly an essential ingredient in the gardening process," Quijano said.

Every Coast of Maine product has clear instructions on its use, written in fairly large type. In addition, each bag has on its front a reproduction of a painting by Eric Hopkins, a well-known Maine artist, which helps it stand out among all of the other gardening products in the garden store.

Quijano is especially excited about two new products for this gardening season.

One is called Kennebunk Blend, which is a dehydrated compost made by adding chicken manure to the mix, which is so light and finely milled that it can be spread with a lawn spreader.

"Everybody says that top dressing with compost is the best thing to do for your lawn," Quijanos said, "But it is labor intensive. But now you can do it with your lawn spreader."

The other is Ogunquit Blend, a mulching compost. This is the larger pieces left over after Kennebunk Blend has been processed. Because it has been composted, it will take less nitrogen away from the soil than traditional mulches.

#### RECIPE INCLUDES FISH WASTE

Winterwood Farm has three products: Shellfish Compost, which is its main product; a Winterwood Farm Planting Mix, which is a mix of its shellfish compost and peat moss; and EcoBlend, which is another compost.

Winterwood Farms started as a farm, has Belted Galloway cattle, has pigs and chickens and still sells organic vegetables at the Saco Farmers Market, Hayes said.

Although the shellfish compost is meant as a soil amendment, a lot of people end up using it as a planting medium in window boxes and other containers.

The farm, like the American Indians who greeted the Pilgrims, adds various fish wastes and lobster and crab shells to make its compost. The seafood compost is approved for use on organic farms, but its third product, EcoBlend, is not.

"We think we could get it approved," Hayes said, "but we haven't tried, partly because we don't want to compete with our own product," the shellfish compost.

The EcoBlend takes waste from such large food processors as Barber Foods in Portland, Stonyfield Yogurt in New Hampshire, 150 restaurants in southern Maine and barn bedding.

"This amounts to a tremendous savings for" the companies providing the items to Winterwood Farms because they don't have to pay to get rid of it.

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