21 The End Product

So you've made your compost, turned it and left it to mature. The next stage is to get rid of it! The last thing you want is a mountain of compost cluttering up the site. How this is to be achieved should be considered in the initial planning phase. It can be a major issue and has legal implications regarding licensing. For more information on marketing and selling, see *PR & Marketing 1 & 2*; also *Grants and Other Funding.*

Production volume?

How much compost is produced will depend of course on the quantity, and type, of material collected for recycling. At a rough estimate, the final product will be around 25 per cent of the original volume of the material. Remember to keep a record of the volume of compost distributed / sold if you are applying for recycling credits.

When is it ready?

A characteristic dark brown colour and earthy smell are not adequate criteria for determining that the composting process is complete. These qualities develop before the compost is mature. An immature compost could be harmful to plants, and it will continue to decompose if bagged up – reducing in volume and producing gases and smells!

When compost has been left to cure for a month or two it should be stable enough for sale or distribution. To check maturity, seal a sample of well-wetted compost into a small plastic bag. Store it for a week or so at room temperature. If it still smells good when opened after a week, it can be considered stable.

Sieving and riddling

However long you leave the compost, if twiggy material, sticks and woody bits went in, they are still likely to be present. This compost is quite usable, and could be sold as a mulch. Some users may feel happier with a finer product. The answer is to put it through a sieve – producing both a finer product, and a coarser mulch material. The coarser material could also be put back to compost further. One project, WyeCycle, will sieve on request, charging for the service.

Methods of sieving vary from low to high tech. The simplest is to throw the material against an old bed frame. Machines are available, and the Seagull project gets on well with theirs.

Bagged or loose?

Community Compost is currently sold loose – by the wheelbarrow or trailer load – or in bags, which may be new or recycled.
For more information, see *PR & Marketing 2 & 3.*

Labelling

Printed plastic sacks are very expensive and do not put across a good recycling message. Most projects just label sacks with a black marker, or attach a simple paper label. The Community Composting Network produces labels that can be printed with a project's own logo – but further labelling may be needed if you sell a range of products.

What's in a name

There is, as yet, no legal definition for the various products of a compost heap, so you can call them what you like, within limits. According to trading standards, misleading labelling would be the only possible crime.

Existing Community Composting projects produce compost products which they sell under a range of different names – including mulch, soil improver, peat substitute, soil conditioner, potting mix, compost, and wood chip. As these terms are used differently by different people: this could cause some confusion – so do make sure that customers know what it is that they are getting, and how to use it. Let customers see a sample if possible.

A common confusion occurs with the word "compost" which, to the average garden centre customer, is a medium in which plants are grown. Traditional garden compost however is something different. The use of the phrase "composted green waste" or "composted garden clippings" could help avoid confusion.

Benefits and uses of garden compost

To help advertise compost products accurately, the various uses, and benefits, of compost are outlined here.

Soil conditioner: Helps light soils to retain water and plant foods; helps heavy soils to drain more easily and to become easier to work

Soil food: Compost provides a supply of slowly available plant foods; contains major nutrients (N, P, K etc) in low quantities. Also all trace elements.

Mulch or dig in: Compost can be applied to the soil surface, or dug into the top 15 – 20 cm of soil. Rougher composts, those containing lots of woody bits and composted woody shreddings, are probably better applied as a mulch. If the compost tends to contain weed seeds, it is better to dig it in.

Peat substitute: Compost is of course a substitute for peat as a soil conditioner in the garden – though it is much more effective than peat in this context. It is not a *direct* substitute for peat in potting mixes however. It can be used as an ingredient of a home made potting mix, but it needs to be mixed with other ingredients such as leafmould, sand etc.

Saves water: Well composted soil (mulched or dug in) will need less watering, and will hold on to water longer in dry weather.

Natural pest and disease control: Compost contains naturally occurring fungicides and beneficial organisms that suppress pests and diseases.

Long lasting: Studies have shown that residual benefits of compost are still present eight years after application.

Testing and analysis

Composted green waste can be analysed for plant food content, pH, presence of unwanted toxic elements, maturity etc. Some projects have had this done, but most don't. It may be worthwhile once or twice for your own information, and particularly if you are concerned about any contamination with toxic elements.

There is no legal requirement to put a nutrient analysis of the product on the sack. As this is likely to be quite variable between compost batches, regular analysis would be required to keep the figures accurate, and the cost would be prohibitive. Providing an analysis can also give a misleading message. The nutrient (NPK) levels will tend to be low, but the value of the material goes far beyond these figures, as the list above shows.

Other relevant cards

- PR & Marketing 2 & 3
- Legal Aspects
- Leaf Mould
- Shredding and Shredders
- Case Studies
- Grants and Other Funding

Further contacts

- Compost Analysis Services
- Community Composting Network