

The scoop on poop



"Behold this compost! Behold it well!

It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops.

It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such

leavings from them at last."

— Walt Whitman, "This Compost" in "Leaves of Grass," 1886

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is considered one of the most influential American poets of the 19th century. He was so fascinated by compost that he wrote a 540-word poem extolling its many virtuous offerings, including:

"The grass of spring covers the prairies,

The bean bursts noiselessly through the mold in the garden,

The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,

The apple buds cluster together on the apple branches "

Whitman goes on (and on, and on). He just can't get over the chemistry that allows soil to accept all manner of plant and animal scraps with the result "that all is clean forever and forever."

Almost 125 years after Whitman penned "This Compost," an Ohio farmer named Gene Logsdon wrote equally enthusiastically, albeit less poetically, about the wonders of composting in his book "Holy Shit: Managing Manure to Save Mankind."

What a difference a century makes! While Whitman's work was not well received during his lifetime, Logsdon's book has been hailed as possibly one of the most important ever written. Asserted Joel Salatin, author of "The Sheer Ecstasy of Being a Lunatic Farmer," "Logsdon has captured the essence of soil building, pathogen control, food ecology and farm economics by explaining the elegantly simple symbiosis between manure and carbon."

I added "Holy Shit" to my pile of winter garden reading because I have a lot of horse manure I need to manage, and if I can save mankind at the same time, all the better. So, based on Logsdon's logic, here is the scoop on poop for divine garden compost.

My gelding, Kidair, is one of approximately 9.5 million horses in the U.S., each of which produces about 20 tons of manure per year, including stall bedding. (Kidair is a neat freak, though, and won't poop in his stall unless he's mad at me.) Logsdon says that 10 tons of well-preserved horse manure will effectively fertilize one acre of cropland every year, so Kidair graciously provides me with enough natural fertilizer for his pasture and every one of my vegetable and flower beds.

Manure contains proteins, carbohydrates, starches and fats, all of which help

to replenish soil fertility. Manure is also a rich source of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium (labeled NPK on commercial fertilizer bags), as well as important trace elements such as boron, manganese and magnesium.

Other herbivorous farm animals besides horses leave the makings for superb compost lying around: cows, goats, sheep, rabbits, alpacas/llamas, chickens, turkeys, ducks. Nutrient levels vary by particular farm animals and their feed and bedding.

The trick is to turn all those mounds of gracious gifts into succoring compost that so richly nourishes our soil and garden plants that poets write lengthy verses with lines such as, "Behold this compost! Behold it well!"

The OSU Extension Service says the key to success is hot composting fresh manure for six months to one year before adding it to garden soil. First, place a mixture of manure and bedding (straw or shavings), along with shredded fall leaves and other plant debris, in a bin that can hold a pile as big as 4 to 6 feet high and 3 to 5 feet wide. This will provide a good nitrogen-to-carbon ratio of organic matter that will decompose more quickly and kill lingering parasites and weed seeds.

Be sure the pile receives plenty of sunlight, and keep it moist but not wet (cover the pile during heavy rains). Turn the pile with a pitchfork a few times as it heats up to 130 to 140 degrees. It really is exciting to see a hot pile of compost steaming in the afternoon sunshine.

Once the pile cools down to air temperature, shovel it over to a second bin and allow it to cure for a few more months. The compost is ready to use when the manure and bedding are no longer discernible, and the material is dark and crumbly with a mild, earthy smell.

Lightly mix the compost into the top few inches of soil — about 40 pounds of composted manure for each 100 square feet of garden space. Not only will the manure improve soil quality, it will also help the soil retain moisture so your

plants don't need to be watered as much. No wonder Logsdon called composted manure holy!

Walt Whitman couldn't believe that a pile of composted manure "grows such sweet things out of such corruptions." Yet, seeing is believing, so join me for "The Scoop on Poop for Divine Garden Compost" from 11:30 a.m. to noon and 1:30 to 2 p.m. Sunday, April 14 at Sundays in Spring at Hanley Farm, 1053 Hanley Road, Central Point. Staff from the Family Nurturing Center's Farm and Food Program will lead an activity in the greenhouse gardens.

The Family Nurturing Center and Southern Oregon Historical Society are co-hosting the event, which takes place from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. today and continues April 14, May 5 and May 19.

Visitors are invited to stroll the gardens, orchards, vineyards and producing fields at the farm. Say hello to the chickens, sheep and lambs, and take part in family-fun gardening activities. Bring a picnic, or buy lunch at the farm prepared by local chefs using farm-fresh food. Enjoy live music, tour the Shakespeare garden, and take a guided tour through the Hanley farmhouse from 1 to 3 p.m.

Admission to the farm and gardening activities is free; house tours are \$5. For more information about Sundays in Spring at Hanley Farm, see www.sohs.org.

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