

# Keeping cool with composting

By Gretel Hakanson

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Think of greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel combustion probably comes to mind immediately. The burning of fossil fuels is naturally a major player in creating a higher carbon footprint, but so is soil.

Soil is the Earth's carbon sequestering *modus operandi*. More than twice as much carbon is stored in the Earth's soil as is stored in live vegetation or in the atmosphere. However, urbanization, conventional agriculture, open pit mining and other poor land use practices are degrading the soil, reducing the amount of stored carbon and resulting in more carbon entering the atmosphere.

These destructive land practices are responsible for nearly one-third of the increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions over the past 150 years. The drastic increase of chemicals, synthetic fertilizers and excessive tilling in place of compost, manure and crop rotation have contributed to a 50 percent reduction of organic carbon in agricultural soils over the past 20 years.

Three national nonprofits - GrassRoots Recycling Network, BioCycle and EcoCycle - are working to change this through spearheading the Cool 2012 Campaign.

Cool 2012 is a "national initiative to inspire and educate state and local jurisdictions on the importance of getting compostable organics out of the landfill" by 2012. Education, public policy suggestions and presentation materials are the cornerstones of the campaign.

Organic (carbon-based) materials make up two-thirds of landfill waste. You may be wondering, "What's the problem if those items are going to break down anyway?" When deposited in a landfill, those biodegradable materials - paper, food scraps, yard trimmings - produce methane, a greenhouse gas and major contributor to global warming.

Methane is much more potent than CO<sub>2</sub>. Studies show that over a 20-year period every ton of methane traps as much heat as 72 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, and landfills are one of the top sources of methane.

The Cool 2012 Campaign aims to eliminate this source of methane by ending the practice of landfilling organic materials and composting them instead. The campaign's website states: "Methane reductions could have an immediate beneficial effect on our climate, much faster than comparable reductions to CO<sub>2</sub>."

Just because something is biodegradable or labeled "compostable" doesn't guarantee that its going to break down in a beneficial way. Tossing that corn-based compostable fork in the trash doesn't do a whole lot of good if it's being sent to a landfill. The absence of oxygen in today's landfills creates anaerobic (no oxygen) conditions, which is the culprit of the production of methane in landfills. Composting, the actively managed process of the decomposition of organic materials, is the solution to reducing landfill-induced methane gas production.



PHOTO: James Patrick  
Members of Tucson Organic Gardeners, Rich Johnson (kneeling in front), Victor Gutierrez (standing on the left) and Liz Marascio apply a fresh layer of rich compost to their community garden.

While we don't yet have a municipal composting program like Seattle, San Francisco and other forward-thinking cities, Tucson is environmentally conscious so we can keep our fingers crossed that one day we each might have a third plastic bin to roll to the curb for compostables along with recyclables and trash. In the meantime, many local individuals and organizations have taken the initiative to encourage composting.

The Tucson Organic Gardeners (TOG) is one example. In addition to classes and extensive information on their website, TOG hosts the compost demonstration at the Tucson Botanical Gardens. There you can see various types of composting in action and TOG volunteers are available to answer questions.

Composting can be a little intimidating at first, especially in the desert. But as TOG President Rich Johnson says, "One of the best things about composting is that you can't do it totally wrong. Nature will claim everything in time. The benefit to doing it with a composting bin and with a little bit of education is that you can do it much quicker."

TOG also has found a clever way to combine recycling with affordable composting. Along with other volunteers, Johnson collects old City of Tucson plastic trash totes and converts them into "BioBins." Virtually indestructible, these composting bins give new life to something that would have ended

up in the landfill. Sales of the BioBins to the public benefit TOG programs.

Once you've acquired your compost bin, it's time to fill it - and Sunflower Farmer's Market can help in that department. Store manager Desi May pioneered the Green

Waste Program, which offers compostable material to the public free of charge.

"Our landfills are precious space and a precious commodity. We don't want to fill them up with something that could be easily repurposed to put nutrients back in the soil," says May.

Grocery store produce departments generate a significant amount of "trim," fruit and veggie scraps on a daily basis. May doesn't want to see that going into a landfill so she initiated the Green Waste Program. Still in a pilot phase, the program is offered at the First Avenue location. Every day at 2:00 p.m. Sunflower Market's staff roll out a plastic bin full of the day's trim and make it free for anyone who can put it to good use.

May is working to get the word out about the program and encourages residents to make use of the free green waste. "It's not yet as grand as I had hoped but it's still making a difference and that's what it's all about," she says. "One step at a time, one day at a time, one push at a time, one reusable grocery bag, one trip not made in a car, right?"

Right indeed.

Author: Gretel Hakanson is a local freelance writer.

## COMPOSTING RESOURCES

### Tucson Organic Gardeners

[www.tucsonorganicgardeners.org](http://www.tucsonorganicgardeners.org)

**BioBins** can be purchased at TOG's Demonstration Garden every Saturday morning, 9-11, at St. Mark's Community Garden, 3809 E. 3rd. St. The garden is only staffed the last Saturday of the month during the summer

### Sunflower Farmer's Market Green Waste Program

Bring your own container and a shovel and help yourself to fresh composting scraps every day from 2 p.m. to dark while supplies last at Sunflower Farmer's Market, 4282 N. 1st Avenue.

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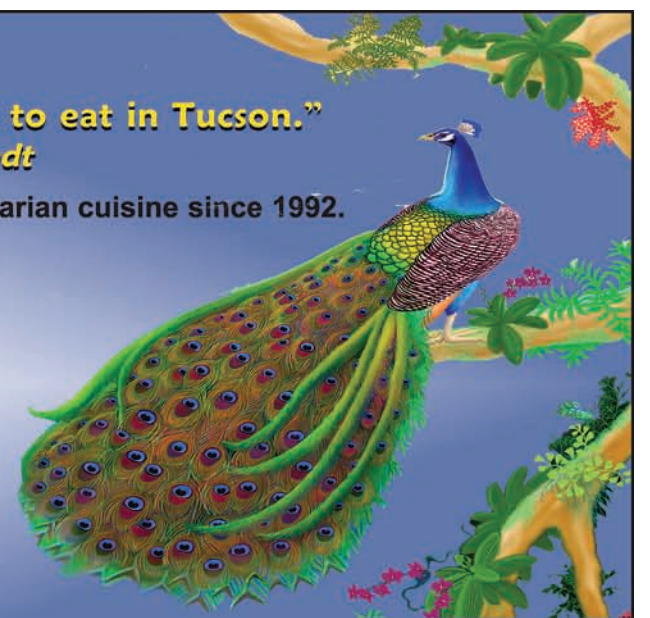
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