



Michigan Compost Markets

A project
to create
composting
opportunities

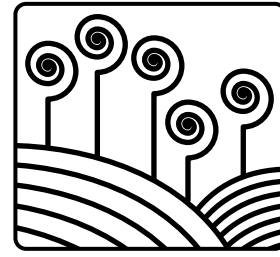
Home Gardening

Home gardeners are increasingly turning to use of composted yard trimmings as a soil amendment and mulch for turf establishment and vegetable and flowerbed planting. Factors affecting compost use by homeowners include the decreased availability of high quality topsoil and reed-sedge peat with the related fact that prices for these materials are expected to rise as their availability decreases.

Home gardeners buy soil products based on convenient containers and aesthetic product qualities such as color, aroma, uniformity and perceived safety of the product. Safety issues of concern to homeowners include the effects on plant growth, safety for use with vegetable crops and safety for human skin contact.

Compost improves the physical, biological and chemical characteristics of soil. Like peat moss, compost raises the organic content of a soil, thereby reducing bulk density and increasing water holding capacity. Unlike peat, compost is biologically alive, a characteristic related to nutrient availability and disease suppression.

The expansion of do-it yourself home and gardening centers throughout Michigan has lead to growth in the use of compost. There are currently over 200 companies in Michigan that sell retail garden supplies. This number includes companies that are involved in the retail sale of garden supplies as well as those that are part of a nursery or landscaping operation. In addition, some large retail outlets that primarily sell furniture, clothing, cosmetics and toys also carry soil products. National retail chains are generally served by national soil product blenders and distributors who have access to large amounts of capital and extensive distribution networks.



Markets Fact Sheet Series

Compost Markets Assessment

Major markets for composted yard clippings include landscapers, nurseries, sports turf, topsoil blenders, home gardeners, agriculture, and emerging specialty uses. Users of traditional soil products are discovering the benefits of compost now that Michigan's ban on yard clippings landfilling is making quality compost more readily available. This fact sheet series explores the unique concerns, practices and potential of each market.

Market segment description:

This sector includes residents who purchase soil products for use on their lawns and gardens. These products are sold in bags or bulk form from the compost site, regional garden centers, or national retail outlets.

Selling locally in bulk or containers reduces marketing and transportation costs.

Advantages of compost use:

Yard clippings compost returns organic matter to the soil, increasing its water holding capacity, cation exchange capacity and improving soil structure. These characteristics help make plants and lawns healthier, and makes soils easier to work. Compost is also generally less expensive than sphagnum peat moss and comparable to high quality topsoil or reed-sedge peat.

Challenges to overcome:

Many home gardeners already use bagged compost products sold by chain stores. The price paid to producers for compost sold to national distributors is quite low. Also the quality of bagged products can be inconsistent and poor, causing gardeners to have a low opinion of compost. Small and local compost producers must find a way to sell compost to this market in a niche that isn't already occupied by one of these large distributors. They must educate residents about the high quality of real compost products. Smaller retail outlets and garden centers with a local reputation provide one such opportunity for reaching this market.

Typical dollar value:

Surveys completed for the Michigan Compost Markets Project found that the cost of soil products sold to home gardeners varies greatly, depending on whether it is sold in bulk or bagged. Bagged soil blends can cost as much as \$43.75 per cubic yard while bulk materials average \$16 per cubic yard. Compost also ranges widely, from \$74.75 per cubic yard when bagged to \$14.65 per cubic yard in bulk. Topsoil, generally sold in bulk, averages \$16.41 per cubic yard.

Quality requirements for the Home Gardening Market

If it is to be used in the home gardening market, compost must have:

Earthy aroma

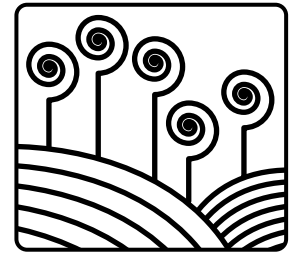
Convenient bagged format

Plant growth parameters of this sector are quite broad, perhaps more flexible than those required for other market sectors.

Quality specifications for this market include general safety and health issues for plants and humans and the capacity to support plant growth. Because this market sector favors bagged soil products, it is important that the finished compost has an earthy aroma.

Breaking into this market sector:

Composters have been successful in selling directly to residents from their processing facilities, or by providing local retail garden centers with finished compost in bags or in bulk. Others have joined forces with regional soil blenders to market soil blends containing finished compost through national retail outlets.



Markets

Application information

Flowerbed planting:

Landscapers presently using compost report success with a mixture of topsoil combined with 25-30% of compost incorporated into the upper 4 to 6 inches of growing medium is recommended. Grassroots, Inc. of East Lansing uses two inches of compost tilled into the existing soil to a depth of four to six inches. This application method is used on approximately 90% of their sites, regardless of whether shrubs, flower beds or turf are being planted. Traverse City municipal landscape crews use a mix of 3-4" of compost incorporated into the upper 10-12" of soil when planting flowerbeds.

Backfill mixes for tree planting:

Traverse City crews use a 50/50 mix of compost and existing soil for tree planting. Guidelines for planting trees include 20 to 40 percent compost in the total volume required for backfilling (*Lawn & Landscape Maintenance Magazine*).

Lawn establishment:

For lawns to be seeded or sodded, apply one inch of compost tilled to a depth of five inches, equivalent to a 20 percent application by volume. A two inch layer of compost is recommended for poorer soils. Compost helps the grass seeds germinate quickly and provides balanced nutrients for the first year of growth.

Project Partners

Resource Recycling Systems, Inc. (RRS)

Center for Microbial Ecology, Michigan State University

Southeast Oakland County Resource Recovery Authority (SOCRRA)

For information call:
RRS at 734-996-1361

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