Why Compost? Why Not??

by Nan Kennedy ('96)

If I were to say that my favorite garden feature is the compost heap, I would of course not be strictly truthful. My favorite garden feature is the bench under the tamarisk. On the other hand, the compost heap is one of the last things I would part with - and with its overhanging lilac and its concealing fence of flower boxes, it really is one of my favorite features.

When it comes to usefulness, of course, the compost heap moves way up the list. It peacefully absorbs bushels of weeds and prunings and fallen leaves, and supplies mulch and fertilizer and potting soil. We spread rough compost on all the beds after the soil has warmed up in spring, where it keeps roots cool and discourages weeds until it breaks down at the end of the summer and is absorbed into the earth, to refresh the cycle of earthworm feeding and casting.

I pot houseplants in a mix of finished compost and perlite; I pot up started seedlings in finely screened compost; I soak compost in water to make compost tea.

I am not alone in enjoying the compost heap, either: it provides cool shelter for a few snakes, as well as innumerable worms of several colors. The earthworms repay the favor by transferring their attention to the garden beds, when a shovel load of compost deposits them there, and making the soil friable and crumbly. The snakes, I hope, eat an occasional garden pest; they must find the compost attractive, because they take up residence repeatedly, in spite of being attacked by cats.

Occasionally the heap itself makes a direct payment; one mild winter, when we’d eaten a lot of avocado salads, we dumped a lot of pits in the compost. That spring, I harvested a small forest of avocado plants - not fruit-bearing, unfortunately, but still very handsome.

All that output does require some input, of course, and a modest effort in creating the carbon-nitrogen balance. The green part is no problem; we pull bushels and bushels and bushels of weeds. We also rake piles and heaps of dead leaves come fall, but they don’t bulk nearly as big as the weeds, so we drive up and down our street on Sunday evenings in October, heaving our neighbors’ bagged leaves into and onto the car. Some of our neighbors, in fact, deliver their leaves to us, and another brings us his collected fireplace ashes every spring. One summer, we even had a neighbor emptying his kitchen compost into the heap - but he found that inconvenient and stopped.

Much of the satisfaction I get from the heap is emotional, not practical. I like to cut down waste of any kind, and composting surely does save on waste. I don’t have to use gas to drive to the store to buy fertilizer that was manufactured with fuel and delivered with more fuel - and that lacks natural nourishment, to boot. The city doesn’t have to truck my weeds and leaves away. I never feel that I’m really wasting food when I toss bad fruit and cauliflower stems; I view them as food for the heap. And I get free avocado plants.