

Markets for blends and bags of compost BioCycle August, 2003

Copyright 2003 ProQuest Information and Learning Company
All Rights Reserved
BioCycle

August, 2003

SECTION: Vol. 44, No. 8; Pg. 45-50; ISSN: 02765055; CODEN: BCYCDK

B&H-ACC-NO: 390005831

LENGTH: 2718 words

HEADLINE: Markets for blends and bags of compost

BYLINE:

Sherman, Rhonda

ABSTRACT:

From the West Coast and Southwest to Iowa and the East, knowledgeable compost marketers are blending feedstocks to meet the needs of their diverse customers. The brand names on the bagged products are catchy as any - names like "Topper," "Amend," "Rose Soil," "Gardener's Gold," "Big Blue Humus." All sell well, perform up to expectations, and illustrate how the art of soil making can mesh perfectly with the science (and down-to-earth detail) of marketing. Garden-Ville produces and sells compost soil blends, mulches, and organic fertilizers. Gardener's Gold of Maine is the largest crab and lobster processing facility in the Northeast, and it got into composting in order to deal with their shell waste. Bluestem Solid Waste Agency is a government organization formed as a partnership between Cedar Rapids and Linn County, Iowa in 1994. Bluestem operates solid waste disposal facilities and the largest composting site in Iowa. There are five bagged soil amendments with composted biosolids for sale under the label Kellogg Garden Products.

BODY:

13#vety=3;enum=0;

FROM the West Coast and Southwest to Iowa and the East, knowledgeable compost marketers are blending feedstocks to meet the needs of their diverse customers. The brand names on the bagged products are catchy as any that you'll find - names like "Topper," "Amend," "Rose Soil," "Gardener's Gold," "Big Blue Humus." All sell well, perform up to expectations, and illustrate how the art of soil making can mesh perfectly with the science (and down-to-earth detail) of marketing.

GARDEN-VILLE OF TEXAS

Garden-Ville produces and sells compost soil blends, mulches, and organic fertilizers. The company evolved from an organic family farm started in 1957 by Malcolm and Delphine Beck near San Antonio, Texas. People were so impressed by their success at growing fruits and vegetables organically that they wanted to buy the compost made by the Becks on their 100-acre farm. Thus, a new business was started and Garden-Ville became well-known for making compost. In January 2001, Garden-Ville was acquired by Texas Disposal System (TDS), a privately-owned waste management company in Austin, Texas that has a composting operation known as Texas Organic Products (TOP). However, Beck continues his research, development and testing of compost products for the company.13#vety=7;enum=1;

Soil blends are made using such feed-stocks as horse manure, bedding materials, yard trimmings and food residuals obtained from within 50 miles of their location in San Antonio. Class A biosolids are used in some of the blends developed for specific purposes like amending alkaline soils or repairing turf.

The company offers 13 products in bulk for wholesale or retail sales. Six blends are bagged: Garden-Ville Manure Compost, Potting Soil, Lawn and Garden Soil, Rose Soil, Sick Tree Treatment and Herb Mix. Rose Soil consists of manure compost, red sand, and black bark. Eddy Garcia, a nationally known rose grower, helped develop this blend. The blend is designed to be more acidic, which is what alkaline Texas soils generally need to support roses. Sick Tree Treatment is a mixture of biosolids compost, lava sand and green sand. In addition to providing nutrients to remedy ailing trees, the blend is good for turf, selling especially well in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. Products are sold in bulk in their San Antonio and Austin stores and bagged products are distributed throughout Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Arizona. The distributor network continues to grow steadily. A large portion of their distributor sales of bagged products are soil blends, followed closely by fertilizer and mulches.

Garden-Ville does not sell to "big box" stores; instead, it distributes bagged products to nurseries and "ranch" stores, and sells wholesale to landscapers. Retail customers can shop at seven Garden-Ville stores, in addition to ordering from the website at www.garden-ville.com. Shipping soil blends is expensive because of the weight, so the company sticks to marketing regionally.

"We call ourselves the microbrewery of soils," says sales manager Will Willard. "We don't blend more than 100 cubic yards of materials at a time, in order to meet our quality assurance standards. For rose soil, we only mix 40 yards at a time. We're not taking a load and throwing it in a bag. Everything goes through a lot of processes before it gets bagged."

Beck has been formulating blends for specific end uses for years, and he is the only one authorized to change their recipes. All of the soil blends are comprised of at least one-third compost; the precise amount depends on the intended application. For example, a greater amount of compost is needed in the Sports Turf blend to get nutrients back in the soil quickly to help repair damage, and a lesser amount of compost is needed in the rose soil blend.

Static-pile composting is done at Garden-Ville, using front-end loaders with three cubic yard-or-larger buckets to heap ingredients together and to turn the pile to mix the materials. The materials are further blended when they go through a Nordberg-Senator screen. At the TDS facility, they layer the various components of a soil blend in a windrow and then mix it with a turner.

Garden-Ville has 35 acres at the back of their property set aside for curing compost. When compost is finished curing, it is moved to the front of the property where the other ingredients for soil blends are stored. By the time the compost gets up to the front it won't heat again, so after they make the mixture it is ready to go through the Bouldin and Lawson bagging machine.

Approximately 120,000 bags of compost-based products are sold per year. Mulch materials, bat guano, and several other products are also sold in bags. The soil and compost blends do not have fertilizer labeling. The majority of their bagged soil blends are sold in quantities of one-half or one cubic foot. Garden-Ville Manure Compost is \$5.50 for one cubic foot and \$11.95 for 3 cubic foot packages. Rose Soil is \$4.95 for a one-half cubic foot bag. Lawn and Garden Soil and Herb Mix sell for \$4.95 for a one cubic foot bag. Potting Soil bags sell for \$3.95 for 8 quarts, \$5.50 for one-half cubic foot, \$7.95 for 1 cubic foot and \$11.95 for 3 cubic feet. Sick Tree Treatment is \$5.95 for a one cubic foot bag.

GARDENER'S GOLD OF MAINE

The largest crab and lobster processing facility in the Northeast got into composting in order to deal with their shell waste. Stricter waste disposal regulations forced Jeff Holden, the president of Portland Shellfish, to look for an alternate means of managing the tons of crab waste generated daily at his plant in Maine. Local farmers had been telling Holden about their increased yields from using composted crab waste on their crops. He learned that the benefits of crab compost had been researched for over 20 years by the University of Maine as well as at research stations in the South. Holden decided that composting crab waste in-house was a permanent solution to his company's waste problem, so he created another company called Gardener's Gold. This is now the fourth year of composting. Compost is made from crab, lobster, shrimp and fish mixed with horse manure sawdust bedding as a bulking agent. Materials are composted in

windrows on a seven-acre site.13#vety=7;enum=2;

Gardener's Gold sells four products in one cubic foot bags that weigh 40 pounds. Potting Soil is a blend of 50 percent compost plus bark, peat and perlite. The Planting Mix combines compost and peat for planting trees, shrubs, roses. Composted Loam is a blend of topsoil and compost for the purposes of patching and reseeding lawns, replenishing raised garden beds, or using where additional soil is needed. Shellfish Compost is for amending soil.

To make the soil blends, a bucket on a skid steer is used. A semiautomatic Express Scale-bagging system is used that volumetrically fills one bag at a time as it is placed under a chute.

Wood's End Laboratories developed the soil blend recipes by analyzing all of the individual ingredients and calculating the exact quantities needed for each blend. The Shellfish Compost has tremendous water retention capabilities due to chitin in the crab shells since chitin holds water like a sponge. Water goes through their compost and gets absorbed, but it does not hard-pack because the shells maintain air space. "If you squeeze the shellfish compost in your hand, it does not clump together," says Holden. "When you open your hand, the compost pours out like powder." Thus, the compost does not compact around tree roots.

Gardener's Gold wholesale prices FOB are \$2.75 per bag for the potting and planting mixes, \$2.65 per bag for Shellfish Compost, and \$1.50 per bag for Composted Loam. Their soil blends are sold to garden centers and landscapers throughout the Northeast, from Maine to New York. Already, the company has sold twice as much this year as what sold last year by this time.

BLUESTEM SOLID WASTE AGENCY OF IOWA

Bluestem Solid Waste Agency is a government organization formed as a partnership between Cedar Rapids and Linn County, Iowa in 1994. Bluestem operates solid waste disposal facilities and the largest composting site in Iowa. The composting facility was opened in 1990 by Cedar Rapids in anticipation of yard trimmings being banned from landfills beginning in January, 1991.

Materials accepted for composting include yard trimmings, clean wood and pallets, drywall, and corrugated cardboard. In 1995, they began accepting organic materials from local industries, including a cardboard recycling company that sells the agency paper fibers that are too short for their recycling process. The site is permitted to accept up to 100,000 tons of material annually for composting. In fiscal year 2001, 88,560 tons were composted by Bluestem.13#vety=7;enum=3;

When materials are received, large organic objects are reduced in size by a universal 60/60 Stump Shredder. Then all of the organics are piled together in 50 to 100-foot trape-zoidal-shaped windrows. Once a week, a Scat composter is used to turn the windrows. Materials are composted for four to eight months, then cured for six to 12 months or longer.

Until mid-1994, the finished compost was used by city departments for operations and sold in bulk to local citizens for a nominal charge. Then they started bagging the compost and selling it at retail outlets as Big Blue Topsoil. Before bagging, the compost is run through a Masterskreen trommel with a 3/8-inch screen. The screened material is stored inside a 60-foot by 150-foot compost bagging building that was built in 1994. When bagging takes place, compost is screened again before it goes into pin-holed heat-sealed bags that hold 40 pounds (one cubic foot).

Automated bagging equipment was purchased in 1997 after Bluestem was awarded a \$150,000 grant and \$190,000 interest-free loan from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. The new equipment decreased Bluestem's labor costs and increased the bagging operation's output by 300 percent. "Our bagger is made by Hamer; Conveying Industries equipment stacks the bags on a palletizer, and the bags are stretch-wrapped by a King Cobra machine," says site supervisor Jerry Osten.

In 2000, Bluestem began mixing sand and perlite with the finished compost to sell Big Blue Potting Soil.

Next they added two more products called Big Blue Humus and Big Blue Compost. In fiscal year 2002, Bluestem sold 307,000 bagged products at supermarkets and garden centers in Cedar Rapids, Des Moines, St. Louis, and western Illinois. "Maturity is the difference between our products," says Shannon Sanvig, Bluestem's technical monitor and sales representative. "Our topsoil is the most mature, the potting soil is derived from the topsoil, the compost is the least mature, and the humus is in the middle." Sanvig continues, "The State of Iowa considers compost a fertilizer product, so we have to list all of our ingredients, the NPK, and every possible use of each product."

KELLOGG GARDEN PRODUCTS OF CALIFORNIA

Kellogg Supply, Inc. was founded in California in 1925 by H. Clay Kellogg after he discovered a soil amendment that restored spent farmland. In the 1920s there was a widely held belief that depleted soils could not be restored and once yields dropped, farmland should be abandoned. So Kellogg set out to prove the benefits of his soil amendment using composted biosolids called Nitrohumus. He developed a variety of planting mixes ideal for California soils to sell to homeowners and retail garden stores. Now known as Kellogg Garden Products, the company has three plants in California (in Carson, Ontario and Sacramento) and serve customers in California, Arizona, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Utah and Hawaii.

There are five bagged soil amendments with composted biosolids for sale under the label Kellogg Garden Products. Amend is a blend with composted rice hulls that increase drainage and soil oxygen. Gromulch is a blend of humus, composted fir bark and selected wood fibers that add organic matter to soil and improve its pH, texture, aeration and drainage. It can be used to amend soils for shrubs, trees, roses, bare-root, ground cover and turf. Concentrated Nitrohumus is a composted blend of biosolids, wood fibers and organic materials that supports all types of landscape plants. It is designed specifically for sandy soils to increase its ability to hold nutrients, add organic fertility, and improve texture, aeration and drainage. Topper is a composted blend of humus, composted fir bark, and selected wood fibers to be used as a seed cover for all seed plantings. It can also be rotary tilled into soil before laying sod. It speeds up the germination rate of seeds by increasing the moisture and temperature of the seed bed. Patio Plus is a blend of composted chicken manure, bat guano, kelp meal and worm castings for use as an outdoor potting soil that stimulates fast rooting then slowly releases nutrients over several months.

Gromulch, Amend and Topper contain composted biosolids that regenerate the nitrogen cycle in soil. Kellogg sells four million bags of these three products per year. They sell a total of 11 million bagged products annually.

Bagged Gardner & Bloome products are made by Cascade Forest Products, a company Kellogg acquired in 1999 that had been serving retail nurseries and landscapers with organic soil products. These soil blends are for independent nurseries that do not want products that are carried in big chain stores. Harvest Supreme contains chicken manure, bat guano, kelp and other ingredients that help break up clay soils and improve drainage, and it is intended for all vegetable and flower gardens. Acid Planting Mix is specially formulated for plants that thrive in acidic soils. Composted fir bark, peat moss, worm castings, and other organic materials are blended to lower pH in the plant root zone in alkaline soils and improve porosity and drainage in clay soils. Soil Building Compost is an all-purpose plant mix containing chicken manure, bat guano, and kelp meal for use in top-dressing lawns, mulching, and bare-root planting. Rose Planting Mix contains alfalfa meal and worm castings to promote abundant blossoming of all types of roses. Potting Soil has chicken manure, peat moss, worm castings, topsoil and kelp meal for use in indoor and outdoor potting and raised beds. Planting Mix contains chicken manure, bat guano, worm castings, and kelp meal for use in seed top-dressing lawns, planting, and mulching. Kellogg also carries a Nurserymen's Brand specifically for independent nurseries that formed a co-op for collective purchasing power, and Dr. Earth Products such as a fast-acting organic fertilizer, potting soils and planting mixes.

Their bags are labeled according to the restrictions placed by the states in which Kellogg sells products. "The restrictions prevent companies from getting carried away with their product success statements," says Tom Adikes, a Kellogg sales representative. "For example, you can't say "scientifically-formulated" on labels or make nutrition claims without declaring NPK values." 13#vety=2;enum=0;13#vety=2;enum=0;13#vety=2;enum=0;

GRAPHIC: Approximately 120,000 bags of compost-based products are sold per year by Garden-Ville, where steps include filling the bagging hopper (top left), loading bags (left), and placing products in stores (above)., Jeff Holden of Portland Shellfish turned his trials with composted crap waste into a "permanent solution" by founding another company called Gardener's Gold., Kellogg's soil amendments which include such feedstocks as composted biosolids, rice hulls and chicken manure blends - add up to 11 million bagged products annually.

LOAD-DATE: November 1, 2003