Composting: Heating up maintenance operations

BY ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

Composting operations and/or use of recycled organic materials on the links is becoming par for the course nationwide. Composting offers the potential to save on disposal and purchasing of soil conditioners.

One example is the Pebble Beach Co. The major landowner on California's Monterey Peninsula manages hotels, wildlife areas, resort and residential property in addition to four golf courses. Until about a year ago, 2,500 tons/year of green waste from these facilities were going to a landfill.

Now, "almost everything that you can think of that is green is going to the compost operation," said Eric Love, director of forestry and ecology for the Pebble Beach Co.

Equipment and operational space are the primary challenges to getting a composting program started.

At Pebble Beach, composting takes place in a section of a company-owned quarry. The land was already disturbed, so minimal site preparation was necessary, Love said. The company purchased a new tractor with a grapple bucket and preshredder, a windrow turner and shredder/processor. The total cost was under $200,000.

"We know we are saving thousands of dollars a month in disposal fees and labor to get the material to the dump," said Love. "The equipment will pay for itself, but we don't know how long it will take."

Organic material savings is another selling point.

"We figure it's costing us $7 a yard for the compost. Before we were purchasing material for $30 a yard," Love said. "The compost is fairly similar in texture and pH to the formerly purchased material and is just as good" for his purposes, he added.

The process starts with shredded brush placed in six-foot-wide windrows. Grass is incorporated into the piles with the turner to achieve better moisture and nitrogen levels. On a few occasions, during rainy periods, an inoculant was added to activate the piles. The first windrows took about six months to produce finished product, but the company since has refined its composting process.

"If we keep the temperatures high for six to eight weeks, we think we will be able to move the material and use it after three months," Love said.

Most of the material is used for environmental restoration, particularly in new plantings of native plants. Although Pebble Beach has yet to utilize its compost in day-to-day golf course landscaping operations, some courses are starting to do just that, according to Eric Nelson, an associate professor of plant pathology at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

At nearby County Club of Rochester, compost has been successful in controlling fungal disease. In three years of applications, fungicide use was reduced 97 percent, Nelson said.

Some composts have disease-suppressive qualities as a result of the microbial activity in the compost itself. Other composts appear to stimulate microbial activity in soil, and thus suppress fungal growth. The only exception is pure yard trimmings compost, which has no suppressive effect at all. However, yard trimmings composts can become suppressive with the help of inoculant, Nelson said.

There are an estimated 14,000 golf courses in the United States. Many may be composting, but it is still a small percentage of the total, according to Roch Gaussoin, turfgrass extension specialist with the University of Nebraska.

Golf courses theoretically can utilize much more organic matter than they can produce in a compost operation, according to Rod Tyler, director of product and market development with Kurtz Bros. In Independence, Ohio, The average course includes 25 acres of fairway. A half-inch application of compost topdressing would use 1,685 cubic yards of material. That calculation does not include greens or roughs. Tyler estimates that most golf courses could only produce several

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BLACKSBURG, Va. — Virginia Tech is offering a five-day program in turfgrass ecology and management starting Jan. 30, designed to provide an overview of the fundamentals of turfgrass management.

The Turfgrass Ecology and Management Short Course is designed for both new professional turfgrass managers as well as experienced managers. Thirteen faculty from different disciplines will offer 36 hours of lectures and lab instruction. The fee for the course is $365, which includes the book "Turfgrass Management" by A.J. Turgeon, a notebook, a certificate, group photograph, banquet, reception and refreshments. The registration deadline is Jan. 16.

For more information about registration contact the Conference Registrar's office at 703-231-5183. For course information, contact Dr. Dave Chalmers at 703-231-5797.

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