

Forests Hold Answer To Garbage Pollution

What to do with the daily accumulation of some one billion pounds of garbage is one of the nation's most vexing environmental problems. But two University of Florida researchers think they have the answer to the garbage crisis.

Instead of burning it, dumping it in landfill, or trying to make some sort of marketable product out of it, they want to recycle it through forest soils. Their new procedure involves grinding up the garbage and mixing it into forest soils where it can decompose.

Experiments at the UF's Austin Cary Forest have shown that pine seedlings thrive in soil mixed with solid wastes. Seedlings planted in the garbage-soil mixture have grown twice as tall as those planted in regular soil, says Dr. Wayne H. Smith, associate professor with the UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

He pointed out that much emphasis has been placed on developing some sort of marketable product from garbage. "Everything from fertilizers to breakfast cereals has been tried with little or no success. Even composting plants, including one operated in Gainesville for a short time, have failed because of the high cost of their product and the limited market for it. The real need is to develop an inexpensive method of disposing solid wastes without harming the environment. Conservationists have long encouraged this approach," he said.

Results of the study indicate that a few hundred acres of forest land could receive all of the annual solid organic waste produced by Gainesville, a city of about 100,000. Growth stimulation of pines and vegetation would serve as an incentive for foresters to allow neighboring municipalities to use their land for recycling wastes.

Besides boosting tree growth, there are other reasons for disposing solid wastes on forest lands. Since trees are not a food product, there's no risk of any kind of human contamination, and the long growing period for pines—20 to 30 years in the South — would allow large amounts of organic material to decompose slowly.

In addition, many forest areas are close to urban areas, and have a very low population density. Tests indicate there's apparently no danger of any ground water contamination either.

The organic waste tested for disposal in forest soils was produced from garbage after most metals were removed. The waste was then ground up and mixed with sludge from a secondary sewage treatment plant.

All timber was removed from the 4-acre site some two years before the beginning of the experiment. Immediately after the waste was delivered to the site, it was incorporated into the soil, but seedlings were not planted until some five months later in December, 1971.

"By early spring of this year, it

was quite obvious that the pine seedlings on the compost treated plots were reacting favorably," explains Don Post, an assistant professor working with Smith on the project.

After seven months of growth, survival and tree height were measured. Survival on the control (non-treated) plots averaged 86 percent compared to 88 to 95 percent on the compost treated plots. Most of the mortality occurred during the dry period of April, indicating a greater moisture holding capacity in the composted plots.

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