

Composting: it's not a backyard hobby anymore

Will yard waste landfill bans boost the growth of compost facilities, spur a green industry demand for recycled waste products?

■ Most lawn and landscape service professionals haven't made up their minds about compost yet.

They're not sure they want (a) to produce it, (b) to take their landscape waste to someone else to produce it, (c) to use compost in their own services, or (d) to sell it.

Woven through these doubts is the dollar sign. And, of course, knowing what compost is and what it can or cannot do.

Many in the green industry are just now educating themselves about the material.

"I think at first you're going to see everyone gaining some interest and knowledge about composting," says Ed Janesz of Kurtz Brothers, Inc., Cleveland, a major supplier of compost, topsoils and other landscape materials in Ohio.

Compost is an accumulation of organic matter augmented with soil and nutrients to provide decomposition. It can be made from a variety of organic waste materials.

It's produced through aerobic microbial processes. Unless oxygen is present or provided through periodic mechanical turning/aeration, the process turns malodourously anaerobic.

The finished product is dark, moist and all but odorless. It's most often used as a soil conditioner or mulch, something that's added to the soil or something that's spread on top of it. It's not classified as a fertilizer because its N-P-K analysis is extremely low, although it does contain trace elements that plants need. It generally has a pH of between 6.9 and 8.1. Part of the value of compost lies in its ability to hold nutrients in the rootzones of plants.

Increasingly, composting is discussed as an alternative to dumping landscape wastes, primarily leaves and grass clippings, in landfills. Even the most optimistic concede it'll be a partial solution at best.

Even so, thousands of tons of leaves and grass clippings will be entering the Ohio recycling stream as of Dec. 1, 1993, the date when landfills there quit accepting yard waste. Several other states are following similar timetables.

Not coincidentally, Ohio is one of a handful of states that have—or will soon have—regulations for locating and operating commercial compost sites. Ohio's rules are nearly complete.

For example, these regulations will stipu-

late that compost facilities be located on compacted clay sites, and that they be operated correctly to discourage leaching and odors. Contained in over 40 pages of verbiage, the Ohio rules at least tacitly acknowledge that composting is now more—much more—than a backyard activity.

Janesz, who carries the unwieldy title of organic recycling development manager for Kurtz Brothers, offers these observations about composting:

- Although many small and community compost facilities will be started, eventually they'll give way to larger, more efficient compost operations.

- Suppliers, some coming from Europe where large-scale composting is commonplace, will begin providing some of the specialized machinery needed for cost-effective and quality-conscious operations.

- There will be a slowly growing market for compost, but only if it's of consistent and



Ed Janesz says yard waste can become valuable compost.

high quality.

Customer education is what Janesz sees as one of the biggest challenges facing the marketing of compost. And marketing will become increasingly important as the volume of compost increases after landfills are closed to yard wastes by 1994.

"If you do a good job of educating your customers about compost, they're going to buy it again and again and again," promises Janesz.

What industry, public perceive to be organic is not the same

■ Are we all talking the same language concerning today's fertilizer products, specifically the organic products?

Chuck Darrah from CLC Labs, an independent soil testing laboratory in Ohio, thinks not.

"There's no doubt about it," says Darrah, "it's confusing."

The confusion starts with the definitions of these products. Regulators, usually with backgrounds in chemistry, supply the official definitions (each state is free to adopt its own) while end users typically describe fertilizer products from an agro-

nomous viewpoint.

For example, the commonly-used nitrogen source urea would be classified as a "synthetic organic" fertilizer, according to the recognized definition of "synthetic organic."

"I don't think that many of your lawn care customers would accept urea as an organic fertilizer," says Darrah. "The public, I think, perceives organic as being natural. The public perceives organic as what, technically, is defined as natural organic."

These distinctions are important, says Darrah, because fertilizer suppliers are



Chuck Darrah: does public know what organic is?