



Composting News

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Custom blending rocks the compost market

Growers in California are using compost supplemented with rock phosphate, gypsum lime and sulfate of potash. California compost facilities operated by Norcal Waste Systems are blending the minerals into compost made from restaurant food scraps.

The two compost facilities - Jepson Prairie Organics, outside Vacaville, and South Valley Organics, outside Gilroy - makers of Four Course compost, store additional amendments on site and mix custom compost blends to vineyard managers' specifications.

Blending rock phosphate into compost, called "rock composting," is an extra step that most compost operations will not take but is highly beneficial to growers, said soil scientist Bob Shaffer, of Soil Culture Consulting in Glen Ellen, Calif.

The phosphate comes from a mine in Florida. "It is very high in quality, a pure source of phosphate particles," Shaffer said.

Microorganisms and humic and fulvic acids in the compost "pre-digest" the phosphate. That action makes the essential

mineral more available to plant roots and increases nitrogen retained in the compost, Shaffer said.

Adding phosphate also provides calcium, iron and trace elements.

"Plants respond to this very well," Shaffer said.

Every harvest removes nutrients from the soil. Nutrient-rich compost returns nitrogen, phosphorus, potash and organic matter to vineyards and farms and gives growers a natural alternative to chemical fertilizers. The finished compost encourages leafy growth and succulence, promotes a strong root system and builds disease resistance. Blending in amendments at the compost facilities also saves growers the time and expense of doing it in the field.

"By applying compost blended with specific amendments that lab tests of vineyard soils show are needed we can tailor the compost to feed vineyards and farms nutrients they more specifically require," said William Brinton, who operates Woods End Research, a soil and compost-testing lab, and advises growers on compost recipes and soil requirements. "Mixing amendments into finished compost is a very practical and logical way to deliver organically approved materials to the soil in the right proportions at one time.

During September and October, the Norcal facilities have shipped 7,500 cubic yards - 218 truckloads - of finished compost made with food scraps collected from San Francisco and Oakland restaurants to local vineyards. Norcal said more than 100 vineyards and several organic farms have applied the rich soil



Adding phosphate also provides calcium, iron and trace elements. Photo: Norcal, taken at Roy Estates Vineyards, Napa County, Calif.

amendment. Many are rushing to apply the soil amendment before the winter rains begin.

The Organic Material Recovery Institute (OMRI) of Eugene, Oregon has a process to approve specific natural amendments based on review of the ingredients and the composting methods. OMRI has approved Four Course for use on organically certified farms.

More than 2,000 restaurants in San Francisco and Oakland and thousands of city homes provide food scraps to the program. Sunset Scavenger and Golden Gate Disposal & Recycling, operating companies of Norcal, collect 330 tons of compostable material a day. The scraps are transported to Jepson Prairie Organics and South Valley Organics. The end products include Four Course and associated blends of nutrient-rich, finished compost favored by Northern California vineyards and organic farms.

"This is our busiest time of year," said Robert Reed, spokesman for Jepson Prairie Organics and South Valley Organics. "The growers want to get this compost on their vineyards and fields now because the rain will carry the nutrients into the soil to feed plant roots, and the compost will help soil retain water."



Many vineyards, like Roy Estates Vineyards, use a broadcaster that applies finished compost along the root line.