

Waste reduction: what you can do

BY OWEN HERTZMAN

On my way to Dalhousie this morning, I noticed that someone had put an old container of toxic furniture stripper into their garbage for curbside pickup. Nearby were four blue bags full of recyclable glass, metals, and plastics.

These folks don't understand

that a small amount of effort to properly handle toxics is as important as their considerable effort to recycle.

This incident illustrates one of the points I made at a presentation during Waste Reduction Week: proper disposal of hazardous and toxic materials should be everyone's number one prior-

ity in dealing with their wastes. This means putting nothing extra down sinks or toilets except materials to clean the pipes, and disposing of all hazardous wastes at the soon-to-be-opened Hazardous Materials Disposal Facility at 50 Chain Lake Road in the Bayers Lake Industrial Park. Hazardous materials include medi-

cines, paints, batteries, solvents, cleaners...in fact, almost anything you wouldn't put in your mouth.

Why should any of us worry about out waste? One could argue convincingly that we have a moral and ethical responsibility to tread lightly on this planet and to reduce our negative effects. But there are more practical reasons to convince yourself and your neighbours. They are as follows:

1) If we reduce our waste substantially, our new landfill will last longer and be easier to manage; and, 2) by reducing our amount of waste we can all save ourselves money through reduced property tax increases and smaller increases in rents.

I said reduced increases because all of us will soon be paying more for our past mistakes. Each of the 350,000 people in the newly amalgamated Metro region generates about 1 metric tonne of solid waste per year. Estimates for the total cleanup, long-term monitoring, and householder compensation at the old Sackville landfill site are in the \$50 million range. If the costs are \$35 million, that's \$100 per person per year. If it's \$70 million, double the numbers.

Whatever happens, we're soon going to be paying more. Some of these increased costs, associated with hauling and handling the garbage stream, can be reduced by diverting material from that stream into recyclables and municipal compost which can be sold. But the most important part of the new Waste Management System is the reduction of the waste stream in the first place.

Beyond the proper handling of toxics, there are six major ways to reduce the waste stream. They are:

- At your work or study place,

press for cost-effective recycling containers in strategic locations, particularly large volume items.

- At home, buy what you need and try to avoid buying what you don't need — there are some economic implications that might be quite intriguing if we all indulged ourselves less. If you already have things you don't need, try to dispose of them in yard sales or with charitable groups, rather than in a trash bag.

- Buy what you need in appropriate size containers. If all containers are too large for you alone, try to arrange to buy with someone else and divide the material. Glass jars with good lids are useful when doing this for food items.

- Examine your waste stream for a typical month and note the largest items by weight and by volume. Try to find ways to reduce the use of these items. Beyond use reduction, try to divert them from the garbage. For example, if you have non-protein organic waste, try to find a way to compost yourself (difficult in apartments) or with a neighbouring homeowner. Many backyard composters need a steady supply of vegetables and fruit to mix with leaves and old plants. Soon the Metro waste collection system will be asking you to separate this material for curbside pickup, but it's still better not to have it moved by truck.

- Look at the big, but unusual waste generation where you live. Perhaps it's autumn leaves or home renovation materials. Try to deal with these infrequent events carefully. In the next two weeks, properly handled leaves will be composted by the Metro Authorities. If you can, pitch in when your building staff, or neighbouring homeowners, are dealing with this problem. An older person with arthritic fingers can often use a hand with large bags of leaves.

- Don't try to reduce your solid waste stream at the expense of the other aspects of waste. Don't burn inappropriate materials in a fireplace or wood stove. Don't dump old oil from a car down a storm sewer. As an example, consider the furnace where you live. By replacing it, you or your landlord may actually generate some solid waste, but make a major dent in excess fuel consumption and air toxics. When I replaced our old furnace last year, in the next heating season we used 25% less fuel. A saving of over 1000 litres worth over \$300.

A couple of final notes of caution when dealing with your own and others' efforts to reduce waste — it's far better to lead by example and it's important not to sacrifice health and safety. Some people may not know how to reduce their waste because of physical or literacy limitations. Help them, don't dis them. If you want to share ideas on this topic, I can be reached by email at owen.hertzman@dal.ca in the newsgroup dal.meteorology or at 494-3683.

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The art of vermicomposting

BY JEFF BARTON

What are the composting faithful supposed to do when they return to university and can no longer use their parent's compost heap?

Vermicomposting is the answer.

Vermicomposting is the Latin verb for "letting worms eat your fruit and vegetable waste so it doesn't go to the landfill and stink up Sackville." It is a simple, low maintenance process which is excellent for environmentally-conscious apartment dwellers.

You can either buy a ready-made vermicomposting system, which cost an exorbitant amount of money, or make your own for about \$30 (at most). I will briefly describe how to do the latter.

The first step is to choose a worm bin. One or two non-vegetarian people can get by with bin sizes of 1'x2'x3' and 2'x2'x8", respectively. I recommend a sturdy, plastic utility bin with a cover to shade the worms. Also, remember to scrub and rinse the bin thoroughly.

The best bedding is hand-shredded newspaper. Its job is to hold moisture and cover your garbage. Tear 1-2" strips and soak in water. Fill your bin to a depth of 8-12" — any more will tend to decrease the bin's oxygen content.

Worms breath through their skin, so it is essential to maintain a moist environment which includes replacing the bedding once the worms have eaten most of it. Add a couple handfuls of soil or compost. This will provide the microorganisms needed to assist the worms in breaking down the garbage.

Worms are the most prohibitive feature you will need. Red worms, the most commonly used, cost around \$22/lb. and can be purchased at local environmental stores.

The cheapest available worms are those you bum from friends or scrounge from beneath a new compost heap. One lb. should be enough for 1-2 people. A 2:1 worm to garbage ratio is suggested, that is, for every lb. of waste added per day, you will require 2 lbs. of worms. Worms are like any other population of organisms — they grow or shrink to a size compatible with the food supply, so I have started with fewer worms to save money. Be careful not to overfeed, though.

Now you are ready to compost! All fruits and vegetables, coffee grounds, tea bags, bread and baked goods, rice and grains, nuts, and pasta can be used. Dried, pulverized egg shells act as a buffer system, especially

against acidic citrus fruit. Don't feed your worms meat and dairy products.

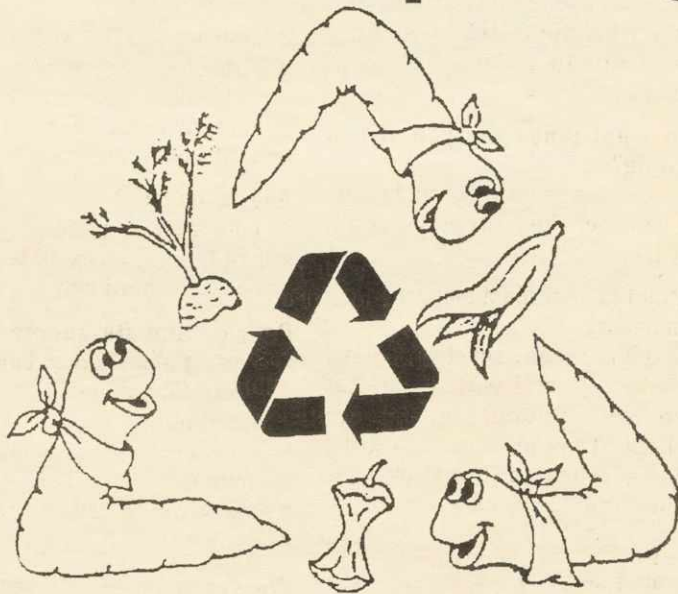
Probably the worst thing you can do is overfeed your worms. The bin will begin to stink because of anaerobic decomposition and the worms may die. To avoid this, keep an ice cream container in the fridge for days when you have an excess amount of waste. With the exception of overfeeding, you can only faintly

smell the sweet aroma of compost, or so house guests say.

This is only an overview and for more information please consult the two excellent references, *Worms Eat My Garbage* and *The Real Dirt*, which are available at the Halifax Regional Library on Spring Garden Road or myself (bartonj@tupmcm1.med.dal.ca).

No more excuses. Start vermicomposting this Waste Reduction Week.

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Waste reduction week

BY JEFF BARTON

Last week was Waste Reduction Week in Nova Scotia. This is an annual event held by local environmental groups to encourage the use of the 3 R's: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Students at Dalhousie University also participated.

Andrea Smith, the Student Environmental Chairperson for Howe Hall, coordinated daily themes for residents so as to promote environmentally friendly living. Tree Appreciation Monday surprised residents with napkin-less meals, held to reduce napkin use which had reached over 118,000 since Frosh Week. Magazines and grocery bags were collected on Wasteless Wednesday to be redistributed to office waiting rooms and grocery stores, respectively.

Members of the Eco-Action Committee of the Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group (NSPIRG) arranged a number of events. Owen Hertzman gave a lecture entitled "Waste Reduction, Waste Management: It's up

to us" and members of the Ecology Action Centre, a large Halifax environmental group, were at the Student Union Building (SUB) on Thursday with a display to explain backyard composting and vermicomposting (composting with worms).

As well, a pile of garbage bags were placed outside the SUB by

Physical Plant staff. This represented the amount of garbage produced daily at the SUB. It is hoped that the approximate 30 bags of garbage can be decreased significantly with greater use of the 3 R's. Specifically, if more students start to use recycling bins, waste reduction at Dalhousie would decrease substantially.

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water...the Gazette brings back its **SCIENCE SECTION**. Jeff Barton and Karina Huelbert are co-editors of this section, and they're looking for writers concerned with the world we inhabit.

So, if you want to live forever, drop by the Gazette office (Rm. 312 of the SUB) or give us a call at 494-2507.