

PRESS RELEASE

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FOR: COLLIER ARBOR CARE

COLLIER ARBOR CARE OFFERS TEA PARTY FOR PLANTS

The folks at Collier Arbor Care want to be invited to tea. They'll even bring the tea. And, since it's compost tea, you don't even have to supply cream and sugar.

For the past 1-½ years, the 72-year-old Portland area tree and plant care firm has been experimenting with replacing its conventional--and even its organic--pesticide and plant nutrition programs with the world's oldest answer to plant nutrition and disease and insect problems.

"We don't know exactly how old the idea of compost tea is, but we know it's been around for a few thousand years. This is the way healthy crops were encouraged before there were chemical fertilizers," said Collier Arbor Care President Terrill Collier, who was installed in early February as the 2009 president of the national Tree Care Industry Association.

"This is the greenest of the green. We're aiming to be a leader in the area of sustainability and replacing fertilizers and pesticides with compost tea is about as sustainable as you can get," he said.

Under the guidance of Collier Production Manager Tom Townsend, a certified arborist, Collier has been brewing its own brand of compost tea in a 300-gallon aerated "tea pot" at its Clackamas headquarters since last September.

The brew is Townsend's own particular mix of water, Alaska humus (a particularly rich soil loaded with good biology and micronutrients), humus acid, kelp and fish hydrolysate (pressed fish), with some "tricks of the trade" occasionally thrown in depending on the specific situation.

"I've been tweaking the formula as I've seen the results and think I've got a pretty effective mix now for all our purposes," said Townsend, who has 20 years of spray experience and who called himself a skeptic when he first heard of compost tea.

Besides seeing satisfied customers, Townsend has been treating the landscapes of Collier employees over the last year. He has been amazed at the results.

"I put this on my garden and it grew like crazy even though I didn't use any fertilizers. After seeing results like that, I became a real convert," he said.

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COLLIER ARBOR CARE'S TOM TOWNSEND prepares to insert "tea bag" into what may be Portland's largest "tea pot", 300-gallon aerated tank at Clackamas headquarters where firm brews its compost tea.

Centuries-old method, tea is effective and most sustainable application available for fertilizing plants and preventing and treating insect infestation and disease, says Townsend, certified arborist who developed Collier's tea formula. Firm, among area's oldest and largest, hopes to make tea its major application over time.



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In Townsend's experience, compost tea clears up disease issues just like conventional pesticides. Insects generally take a few days to go away because they are "being parasitized" or fed on by other organisms introduced or encouraged by the tea. Building up the soil biology can take from months up to a year or more to correct, depending on the severity of depletion.

"We can take soil or foliage samples to get a base line then start to correct the deficiencies. We can even brew special teas targeted to soil analysis results," Townsend said.

In replacing fertilizers, compost tea has living organisms that are added to the soil or which boost existing beneficial fungi, bacteria, nematodes, ciliates, protozoans and mycorrhiza. These organisms feed on detrimental organisms or help release nutrients to a plant, making it more readily available.

All soils and foliage have beneficial and detrimental organisms, Townsend said. Construction generally destroys many of the good organisms due to soil compaction and removal. Conventional pesticides, fertilizers, pollution and poor drainage also destroy what he calls the "beneficials", adding that "drenching the soil with compost tea adds the good guys needed for a healthy landscape back into your soil and on foliage." Compost tea also makes mulch more effective because it activates these beneficials.

Used as an insecticide and ridding plants of diseases, the tea is sprayed directly onto leaves and soil where its biology attacks pests. In terms of disease, tea makes plants healthier so they can ward off diseases and it actually attacks some of the disease organisms.

As an insecticide, "a chemical may rid you of your aphids a day or two quicker, but when it comes to long term health plant care with tea, there's no comparison," Townsend said.

Over time, compost tea also helps break down organic matter, breaks up compacted soil (like heavy northwest clays) increases worm activity, reduces draught stress and allows for less watering. Used on lawns, it's the "ultimate organic" way to encourage grass root growth (Townsend has a photo of compost tea-treated grass with three-foot-long roots) and to discourage weeds.

"The list goes on and on...I know that it sound a little like the claims for early 20th Century patent medicine--cures arthritis, gout, athletes foot and dandruff--but these teas really work," Townsend said laughing.

He pointed out large nurseries, farms and vineyards have been using teas for some time and that ranchers sometimes spray it on their cattle to discourage flies and kill undesirable insects.

If they're so effective, why haven't compost teas replaced all chemical applications already?

Well, said Townsend, compost team applications are a little more expensive 10 to 15 percent more than Collier's current organic offerings. To some extent, this reflects the time it takes to brew the tea (after two days of "fermenting", the one-foot square tea bag is dropped into the brewing tank ("tea pot") where it spends 12-24 hours percolating into the aerated water) and the need to completely clean truck holding tanks after each application.

"Chemicals in a tank can kill some of the living beneficial organisms, so we've got to be very careful to keep our equipment clean," he said.

Currently Collier's tea is brewed in the 300-gallon tank during the April to November application season when it's most effective because soil needs to be warmer, but Townsend sees the time when more tanks will be needed. "We're aiming to make this our major application over time. Compost tea has been forgotten by most applicators and needs to be rediscovered," he said (and the firm has undertaken to educate others in the "green" community on its benefits).

Collier's tea, which is one of only a few being used in home treatments in Portland, is tested under a microscope every day to make sure it contains the desired mix of organisms. Periodically, an independent laboratory also tests it.

Like beer (which Townsend also brews at home), each brewer has a preference. Some are brewed warm. Townsend prefers a cold brewing process. Each formula is a little different and Townsend said he's not sure yet if one is better than the other. But, "when we sent ours off to be tested the first time, the lab said it was one of the most effective teas it had seen."



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