

Compost It!

"How's the salad?" Bob asked. He had invited me for lunch and was testing a new dressing he'd concocted.

"Not bad" I replied, and then changed the subject so he wouldn't ask for any more detail. "I see Paul is finally hauling all that yard debris out of his back yard." Paul is Bob's neighbor to the north.

"Yeah. He's a little upset since he received a violation letter from conservation department for dumping yard debris in the back of his property next to the wetland. He really didn't know any better. So I told him that the reason he got that letter is that the state and local wetlands protection regulations protect the area within 100 feet of the edge of coastal banks and wetland resources; and that any activity that involves altering, filling, removing, dredging, or building is not allowed in these areas *unless* the Conservation Commission has issued a permit. And it was the dumping at the edge of the wetland that was a violation."

"Excellent, Bob. I guess our conservation conversations are sinking in." I really was pleasantly surprised.

"Did you tell him that dumping lawn clippings and yard debris into wetland areas and over coastal and inland banks is harmful to our natural resources? That the debris smothers natural vegetated growth that would otherwise help prevent erosion, aid in surface and groundwater quality protection, maintain stability of steep banks and provide wildlife habitat? and dumping yard debris can potentially spread nasty invasive species into the wild?" I asked. "And that the debris releases excessive nutrients, like nitrogen, and other yard chemicals that may have a detrimental impact to ecologically sensitive areas?"

"Uh, no. I didn't know those details", he said somewhat defensively, and then continued, "So I guess Paul has to haul it all to the dump."

"That's one good way to get rid of it - the Town Transfer Station does compost grass & leaves and gives the resulting product - mulch - away for free. And it really is a best practice to 'actively' compost - uh, in an upland area of course. Maybe you should suggest that to him," I offered.

"Compost?" he asked. Had another teachable moment arrived?

"Bob, I know you've heard of it." Surely he was kidding. But just in case, I continued, "composting involves mixing yard and household organic waste in a pile or bin and providing conditions that encourage decomposition. The decomposition process is fueled by millions of microscopic organisms (bacteria, fungi) that take up residence inside your compost pile, continuously devouring and recycling it to produce a rich organic fertilizer and valuable soil amendment."

"Sounds complicated."

"Not at all", I responded. "The chemistry might be complex, but the process of working a compost pile is simple. Tell Paul I'll be glad to help him or send him to [www.composting101.com](http://www.composting101.com). Lots of info there. And actually, composting is a great idea whether or not you have property in a protected resource area. It's basic recycling of nutrients - makes for a great garden."

I hadn't finished my salad. The dressing was a bit tart. And it was time to go. "Bob, lunch was great. Just dump my leftovers into your kitchen scrap bucket for your compost bin."

"What? Kitchen scrap bucket?" Another teachable moment—but for next time.

*Compost Bins (\$38) and kitchen scrap buckets (\$7) can be purchased at the Town of Chatham Transfer Station, 97 Sam Ryder Road, West Chatham. For more information on composting, contact the Chatham conservation office or the Cape Cod Cooperative Extension.*