



SPREADWING FARM

Compost on a diversified small farm

AT A GLANCE

Benefits

- Improved soil tilth
- Plant available nutrients
- More vigorous crops

Challenges

- Producing compost on-farm is not currently feasible
- Sourcing high quality compost free of trash
- Avoiding excess potassium, phosphorous and salts

ABOUT THE FARM

Spreadwing Farm is an organic, regeneratively managed 15 acre diversified farm in the Capay Valley. They manage pastured cows, goats, chickens, fruit orchards, and a one acre market garden. Liz Schroeder oversees the vegetable garden and dairy and beef cows, and has farmed for over twenty years. She shares the benefits and considerations around compost use at Spreadwing.

KEY BENEFITS OF COMPOST AS AN AMENDMENT

"I've definitely been using more compost now that I was a few years ago", Liz notes. She emphasizes that they have observed better soil tilth in the farm's heavy soils, while the compost provides plant available nutrients and improved water holding capacity. In an informal farm experiment, she applied compost to half of the vegetable crops and mineral based fertilizer to the other half. She saw more vigorous crops in the compost area, especially in longer season crops like tomatoes. She notes that compost may be more time and space efficient than cover cropping in that it does not require land to be taken out of production, keeping in mind that cover crops provide their own unique benefits to the soil.

USING COMPOST ON THE FARM

In some areas of the garden, Liz applies up to 40-50 tons/acre; however, most areas receive half that amount. She applies gypsum with the compost for additional calcium and sulfur. Currently, Spreadwing sources from an operation that utilizes a large amount of chicken manure and bedding, so they have best results with letting it age once it's delivered. This is done by unloading the compost delivery on a tarp and covering it with an additional tarp to age anywhere from a few weeks up to six to eight months, depending on the time of year and seasonal needs. Once it's aged properly, the smell improves considerably. They make sure to look at the nutrient analysis provided from their compost source, keeping in mind that potassium and phosphorus need to be managed to avoid excess.



Liz Schroeder
Spreadwing Farm

CHALLENGES

Liz explains that Spreadwing doesn't currently have the resources to make sufficient compost to fertilize their vegetable gardens. Although they have dairy cows, they don't produce enough bedding to provide a source material to make compost on-farm. In addition, their water is high in salts and boron, which could accumulate in the compost if they made it themselves. Furthermore, as a certified organic operation, the extensive requirements to produce compost pose a barrier. Generally speaking, sourcing high quality, clean compost can be difficult, and trash is a common problem with compost sourced from municipal green waste. High levels of salts can also be problematic, especially with animal manure-based compost.

A WORD TO OTHER GROWERS

Liz advises other growers learning about compost application that soil testing is key to avoid soil imbalances, particularly with heavy compost applications. "Know your source and exactly what's in the compost you're getting. Take good care of your compost." Cover it properly, and don't leave it exposed in the sun where nutrients will be lost.

[Learn more and access compost related resources](http://www.caff.org)

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Photos courtesy of Liz Schroeder / Spreadwing Farm