

NEWS RELEASE  
June 26, 2002

## NEWSPAPER MAY BE SAFELY ADDED TO COMPOST PILES

### BACKYARD HORTICULTURE

By Gary W. Hickman, Horticulture Advisor  
University of California Cooperative Extension, Mariposa County

Paper added to a compost pile will decompose if it is shredded and mixed with green plant refuse. Most households have an ample supply of old newspapers, magazines and sometimes even telephone directories, but some gardeners worry that the ink used in these publications may add toxic chemicals to their compost. An article in *Co-Hort*, a University of California Cooperative Extension newsletter, describes some work on this topic done by Vincent Lazaneo, U.C. Horticulture Advisor in San Diego County.

Lazaneo collected samples for laboratory analysis from newspapers, magazines, and telephone directories in San Diego. He collected a representative sample of paper from each source with a paper punch. Glossy paper inserts were removed from newspapers and sampled separately. Samples from phone books did not include covers, and samples from magazines did not include covers or postcard inserts.

Lazaneo submitted the samples to the Analytical Laboratory at the University of California, Davis. He asked the lab to test all of the paper samples to determine the concentrations of boron, cadmium, copper, lead, and zinc.

Firm conclusions cannot be drawn from the test results since only one issue of each publication was sampled. However, based on his test results, Lazaneo reports that phone directory paper and the newsprint portion of newspaper appear to be the best sources of paper for making compost. Samples from these sources generally contain a

lower concentration of copper and lead than paper from magazines or the glossy inserts in newspapers. All sources contained a similar amount of zinc, with the exception of glossy paper from the local newspaper, which had a higher concentration. The amount of cadmium in all sources was less than 0.01 parts per million (ppm).

To achieve some perspective, Lazaneo compared the concentration of heavy metals from paper sources with levels found in California soils. The concentration of heavy metals contained in paper is often less than that occurring naturally in soil. An analysis of 26 soils gave values for zinc ranging from 5 to 142 ppm; values for copper ranged from 4 to 33 ppm; cadmium values ranged from 0.1 to 1.1 ppm, and the lead content of six soils ranged from 8 to 27 ppm.

From Lazaneo's brief study, it appears that some papers may be safely used as additions to compost piles.

For a free leaflet on Composting, call the U.C. Cooperative Extension office in Mariposa, 966-2417. Ask for publication 8037.

The University of California prohibits discrimination against or harassment of any person employed by or seeking employment with the University on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, physical or mental disability, medical condition (cancer-related or genetic characteristics), ancestry, marital status, age, sexual orientation, citizenship, or status as a covered veteran (special disabled veteran, Vietnam-era veteran or any other veteran who served on active duty during a war or in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge has been authorized). University Policy is intended to be consistent with the provisions of applicable State and Federal laws. Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to the Affirmative Action/Staff Personnel Services Director, University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1111 Franklin, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor, Oakland, CA 94607-5200, (510) 987-0096.