

## **Brewing a different cup of tea for the garden**

By Catherine Dale

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One thing that has kept me a keen gardener for many years is the wealth of new information emerging about ways to enhance plant health. I have learned to discard practices I have followed for years as science shows me a better way.

I worked for several years at the GVRD Compost Demonstration Garden where part of our job was to make and manage composts. Little did we know that the batches of “compost teas” we made by soaking compost in stagnant water were actually harming the soil environment we were trying to enrich.

Because of the work done by Elaine Ingham at Oregon State University I now know that compost teas need to be aerated to be beneficial. If the tea stinks (as ours often did) it has gone to the anaerobic dogs and contains alcohol among other harmful substances and should not be used in the garden.

I brew up about 25 liters at a time here at Eagles Estate Heritage Garden for use in the garden and to inoculate new batches of compost I am making. I manage about an acre and a half and can inoculate the garden beds with drenches of compost tea to establish the same web of beneficial microorganisms in the soil that otherwise would take yards and yards of compost to do.

Compost tea can be made at home. The system I use cost about \$40.00 to set up.

### **Equipment**

- A 25 liter or 5 gallon bucket
- The most powerful aquarium pump you can get
- A gang valve
- Air tubing
- Bubblers to attach to the tubing
- Unsulphured molasses
- About 2 ½ kilograms (5 pounds or 20 cups) of mature sweet smelling compost
- About 20 liters or 4 gallons of de-chlorinated water (aerated tap water)

### Steps to set up the brewer

1. Fill the bucket with water, leaving enough space for the compost. You can let the water sit overnight to get rid of the chlorine, or run the bubbler for a few hours.
2. Add about a tablespoon of molasses (mixed with warm water) to feed the microorganisms.
3. Add the compost and stir well. Sink the bubblers into the brew. You may have to weigh them down to make them stay on the bottom. You want the water to be circulated vigorously.
4. Attach the air tubing to the gang valve, bubblers and pump. Plug it in.
5. In 24 to 48 hours the compost tea will be ready to use. Strain or decant the liquid and use the tea right away, don't let it sit without oxygen as the bacteria will soon start to die, and the brew will start to smell bad. Use a watering can or low-pressure sprayer to apply the tea to the foliage or soil. The compost from the bucket can be spread on the garden.







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Recommended reading for more information about making and using compost teas can be found in *Teaming with Microbes* by Jeff Lowenfels, as well as any information on the internet by Elaine Ingham. Come by the Eagles Estate Heritage Garden and see what's brewing.

*Catherine Dale is the head gardener at TLC The Land Conservancy's Eagle Estate Heritage Garden. He holds a certificate in landscape horticulture and teaches part time with Burnaby School District's residential landscape technician course. Dale has also conducted classes for the City of Burnaby in conjunction with the school district on the European chafer pest, organic gardening, and managing your lawn organically.*