

Reflections on Biodynamic Gardening



Terra Simpatico — Biodynamic Compost by Maggie Lee

Originally published in the Summer 2009 issue of [Biodynamics](#). Maggie Lee is proprietor of [Terra Flora](#), a garden design-build landscape firm in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Whatever the style in romancing the regional, our essential aim is creating a visual cohesiveness — a setting at ease with its surroundings. By thoughtful design, thorough cultivation, and a resilient plant palette, we marry inspiration with sustainability. For more information and additional published articles, visit the [Terra Flora website](#).

Photos courtesy of Maggie Lee

Through the art of gardening, we can experience our relationship with the soil in a way that is both intimate and local, while as an activity that is practiced worldwide, connecting and deepening our rapport with our earth Gaia.

Plants are utterly open to and formed by the influences from the depths of the earth to the heights of the heavens. Permeated by celestial rhythms, while responding to light and warmth, water and earth/soil, the plant grows (Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association Resource Catalog).

Gardening in Santa Fe since 1981, I have come to know her soils rather well. Over the years, we have responded in a thoughtful manner, which has proven to be mutually beneficial. Given the changing weather patterns of our planet, inclusive of the Southwest, harvesting and organizing water, land contouring, cultivating and restoring the soil, while balancing its alkalinity, are all essential to ensure renewing, sustained vitality and beautiful, healthy results. It is also wise to group plants compatible in cultural and moisture needs. An appropriate layer of mulch buffers temperature extremes and retains moisture and soil coolness.

Integral to biodynamic practices is the building of a soil/plant partnership that is self-regulating — i.e plant growth in direct proportion to vitality in the soil to actively decompose organic materials. So the intention in our cultivating practices is aimed toward improving the receptive capacity of our soil — its inner liveliness. This process is enhanced by the quality of *balanced life force* found in biodynamic compost. Reference to these life forces is reflected in the name, originating from the Greek, as bio-life and dynamis-energy. This agricultural and gardening practice was derived from a series of lectures that Rudolf Steiner presented to gardeners, farmers, and veterinarians in June 1924 in Koberwitz, Silesia, which is now part of Poland.

Biodynamic compost is built in layers, utilizing dry-green matter, manures, garden soil or similar, water, and six compost preparations inserted into the body of the pile.

These preparations are specially made plant-derived substances which *radiate energies* through the pile and which

organize and balance aerobic fermentation in the breakdown process. They serve as catalysts, directing the decomposition and buildup of materials in the pile while bringing about a speedy and even breakdown. In other words, they lead the fermentation in an optimizing direction. Steiner designated yarrow, chamomile, stinging nettle, valerian, dandelion, and oak bark, as those members of the plant kingdom which hold particular element(s) in the best possible form and/or ratio for use by the soil. These preparations facilitate transference of cosmic forces into an organic connection.



With this method, the organic matter is more thoroughly digested, thereby influencing the formation of *stabilized humus*, which is the capacity of organic matter in ripened compost to store nutrients and moisture. Humus is the breakdown and transformation of raw organic matter into simpler compounds and, through proper combination of soil bacteria, it re-assembles compounds to become complex lasting substance.

In the garden we can discover "a tablespoon of good topsoil will have billions of microorganisms, all in varying states of growth, death and reproduction. Humus is, more or less, *the persistent residue of this biological activity*. Although a tiny fraction of soil by weight, the presence, condition and *activity* of this humus is very effective in enlivening, stimulating and re-awakening the life forces in the Earth, soil and plants" (Mason Vollmer, 2005 *Stella Natura Biodynamic Calendar*). James Lovelock, in his recent book on Gaia reminds: "[I]t is the 'underworld of Nature' . . . for the most part, these denizens of the soil, the micro-organisms, the fungi, worms, slime molds and the trees — that keep Gaia going."

The cover of the June 2007 *Wine Spectator* features the Benziger Winery in Sonoma, California. Their vineyard and gardens use Biodynamic methods and practices. In describing biodynamic preparations, they relate that "they are triggers that initiate biological activities aimed at bringing the right energies at the right time to the soil and plants." These activities include strengthening life forces, stimulating root growth, soil micro-organism production, and humus formation.

Hugh Courtney of [Josephine Porter Institute for Applied Biodynamics](#) has been creating the preparations since 1982. He describes the dynamic rather than physical properties of the preps. "With BD agriculture and preps, we are asked to think in terms of *carriers of forces*, rather than substances. Just as the effects of the forces of magnetism or gravity can be observed without actually being able to see these forces, so we can recognize through their effects, the forces which are released through the use of BD preps." They can be experienced in the heightened fragrance and subtler colors in flowers and in the especially delicious flavors of foods. Crops and livestock are healthier, more disease resistant.



As the topsoil becomes deeper, it is less subject to erosion, the living substance is improved. "The humus in the compost becomes *colloidal* (held in suspension) and the micro-organisms ordinarily working to decompose materials, rather continues assisting in building stable humus and maintaining soil fertility. Plant roots and fine root hairs penetrate further and digest this humus . . . plants are stronger" (from phone interview with Hugh Courtney, July 2005).

Gaia, animated and responsive, is a self-regulating intelligence we can trust to teach us what we need to

know — for there is a reciprocal and rejuvenating connection bonding human nature to Gaian nurture. If we remain grounded and awake to this connection, we deepen our potential to grow, evolve, and illumine our earthly divinity.

Let us garden Gaia with loving care.