

## COMPOSTING MATTERS

by Paul van der Werf

*"The really good ones share a common attribute and that is a passion for what they're doing."*



### COMPOSTING PIONEERS

## The Operators

In the ongoing series called Compost Pioneers I've profiled organizations whose contributions have helped develop our industry.

I'd now like to mention the operators: these men and women who operate composting facilities are also "compost pioneers." Their day-to-day world is not a sexy one. They get dirty. Imagine, if you will, a Turkish bath adjoined to a Sauerkraut factory. Their clothes smell when they go home. They may not be scientific experts but they understand the job at hand and are the backbone of the industry, Harry Potters bending the microbial waste to their will.

Compost operators have evolved with the industry, especially since 1990. Since that time, most facilities have been open windrow and have generally composted simple wastes such as leaf-and-yard waste. In 2010 the scale and complexity of composting facilities has increased considerably. Close to three million households in Canada have access to some kind of green bin or source-separated organics program. This

explosion of green bin composting caught many off-guard and has required facility operators to become more sophisticated.

It's been a while since I operated a composting facility on a day-to-day basis, but I remember it clearly. The first site that I ever worked at was in Mississauga, back in 1994, while working for Elora-based Compost Management. The site was basically a field with some windrows, and featured mostly leaf-and-yard waste and some food waste. I was clearly no operator then. I was fresh out of school and had a "superior" knowledge of the science, but I had no clue how to operate the equipment or the facility.

The operators of this plant were older than me — equipment guys with some minimal knowledge of the science behind composting. They viewed me with suspicion. Too much book learning; not enough common sense.

I remember soft-peddling my knowledge of the science. For me,

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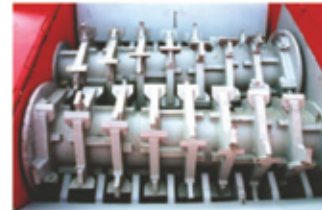
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helping operate a composting facility was part of a childhood ambition: to use my training and education but not be confined to a desk.

I was acutely aware of their opinions and felt the need to earn the respect of these rough-around-the-edges equipment operators. I knew much of what needed doing, and had to prove it to them by getting my hands dirty (and showing it didn't bother me). I leapt in feet first, using my agricultural background to learn how to operate the equipment, help with the "heavy lifting" of compost facility operation, while at the same time I ran around taking temperatures in the time that was left. Slowly I learned how to mix common sense and science.

I had to somewhat repeat the process when I went to work for Green Lane Environmental in London, operating their (then) state-of-the-art composting facility to process St Thomas' SSO. I was left to manage a facility and operate a composting turner — the second one off what was a short-lived assembly line (and clearly not entirely through its required R&D). The first day I didn't know how to start it! Slowly our team made it all work.

While I may have managed this facility, it was my operators that ran the place. As remains the case today, the technology was evolving and it was far from perfect. The compost turner was in constant need of repair. The air handling system in the building and biofilters were (it turned out) inadequate. The operators kept everything operational and in good repair, and helped me make the facility work.

The grizzled operator, and I say that affectionately, is handier and better versed in the equipment operation than I will ever be. The real-

ly good ones share a common attribute and that is a passion for what they're doing. In our evolving and technologically imperfect industry, they're the archetype of what has made composting work.

As the developer of the Composting Council of Canada's Compost Facility Operator Training course and its teacher for ten years, I've seen the evolution in compost facility operators up close. In that capacity I've had the privilege of meeting and interacting with well over 500 operators. In my mind, teaching this course in its various incarnations was key to opening doors for operators. Understanding and connecting with the science helps them make better compost and better identify and solve facility problems.

In the next 20 years, composting will continue to make strides and most certainly be joined by other organic waste processing technologies. For composting to succeed it will need to overcome its current technological hurdle of effectively and consistently dealing with the odour generated as part of the process. Many have figured this out but there's still a long way to go.

I'm sure that the compost facility operators will be there continuing to make the older technology work, but striving to make refined technologies work better. They'll continue to employ their common sense, coupled with some science and passion, to make the process work. ♻️

*Paul van der Werf is president of 2cg Inc. in London, Ontario. Contact Paul at [www.2cg.ca](http://www.2cg.ca)*



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