

Ornamental OUTLOOK

October, 2001 • Volume 10, No. 10
A Meister Publication

McCorkle Nurseries Makes Its **Mark**

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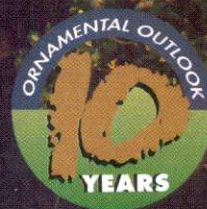
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Capitalizing With COMPOST

New research may help compost to become a cheap alternative to traditional growing media.

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Compost made from wastewater sludge and yard trimmings could replace peat in the pots of many store-bought plants.

Using alternatives to peat would please environmentalists opposed to the mining of the natural resource from sensitive lands, says Sandra Wilson, an assistant professor with the University of Florida's (UF) Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

"This will reduce our dependence on peat," says Wilson. "Environmentalists believe that mining peat bogs destroys wildlife habitat and vegetation which will take a long time to regenerate.

"But the main point is that we have this biosolid waste compost that we need to find a use for," she says. "This could stimulate new markets for the compost, and the nursery industry could realize a reduction in their production costs that could then be passed on to consumers."

Producing Healthy Plants

Wilson, based at UF's Indian River Research and Education Center in Fort Pierce, FL, has been studying several species of common perennial landscape plants to determine which ones will thrive when growers use compost instead of traditional media. Her most recent study looked at Mexican heather (*Cuphea hyssopifolia*). She says plants grown in compost were just as healthy and vigorous, although a little smaller, than plants grown in traditional peat-based media.

"Generally, plants grown in media that consisted of 50% compost took

just as long to grow to a marketable size and were indistinguishable from plants grown in standard media," Wilson says.

"Depending on the plant species and watering practices, you may be able to use up to 100% compost."

Meeting Market Demands

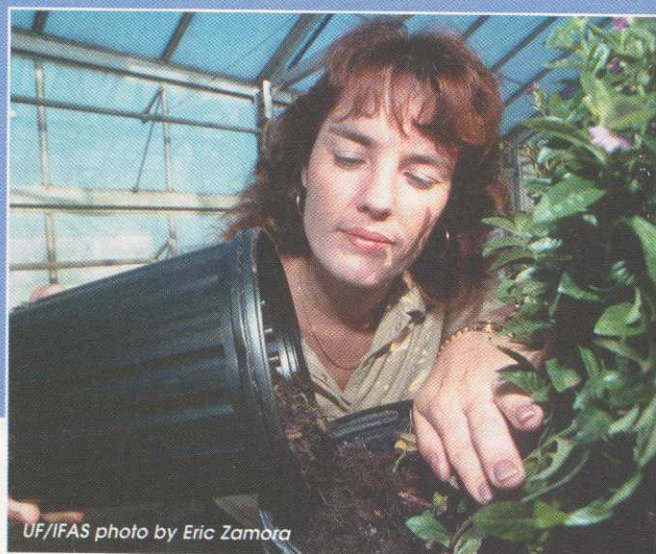
Kevin Kraft, owner of Kraft Gardens in Deerfield Beach, FL, says that most nursery operators are sensitive to environmental concerns and would welcome the opportunity to increase their use of composted waste products. He says the product ultimately needs to satisfy consumers as well as the nursery industry.

"It will take some research that includes growing plants in compost to convince growers that it is viable," says Kraft, who is chair of the research center's Ornamental Advisory Committee. "The product needs to be acceptable to the final consumer — so it must hold up well, not have any objectionable odors, and not break down too rapidly."

Kraft's nursery produces ornamental plants in pots that are used inside residential and commercial buildings, so the questions of stability and lack of odor are extremely important. If compost proves to be a viable and less expensive alternative to current products, the industry should accept it, he says.

Keeping Up With The Competition

"It all comes down to the bottom line," says Kraft. "As a soilless media, the compost product has to hold up because some of these plants can remain in pots for a year



UF/IFAS photo by Eric Zamora

Sandra Wilson says using compost as an alternative to peat may help nurseries save money.

or more. Of course, everybody wants to save money and be competitive. If your competitors are using it successfully and spending less money, you would want to use it as well."

Patrick Byers, assistant director of compost and vegetation services for the Palm Beach County Solid Waste Authority, says agencies that produce compost would be delighted if nurserymen like Kraft started using compost to grow their plants.

"As markets open up for organic products and people see compost being used successfully, they will become more inclined to use it themselves," says Byers, whose facility turns out 190 tons of compost each day. "The increased usage will make it more cost-effective to recycle organic products that are presently going into landfills."

Wilson says the quality of the compost available to growers is critically important.

"The Palm Beach County Municipal Solid Waste Authority operates one of the top compost facilities in the country," Wilson says. "They produce consistent, reliable, stable compost of an exceptional horticultural grade. A nursery in other areas that doesn't have this 'top of the line' compost facility may not experience the same results." ■

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