

COMPOSTING IN THE CITY

Behold this compost! Behold it well!
Perhaps every bite has formed part of a
sick person-Yet behold!
The grass of spring covers the prairies,
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mold
in the garden,
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,...
from Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass

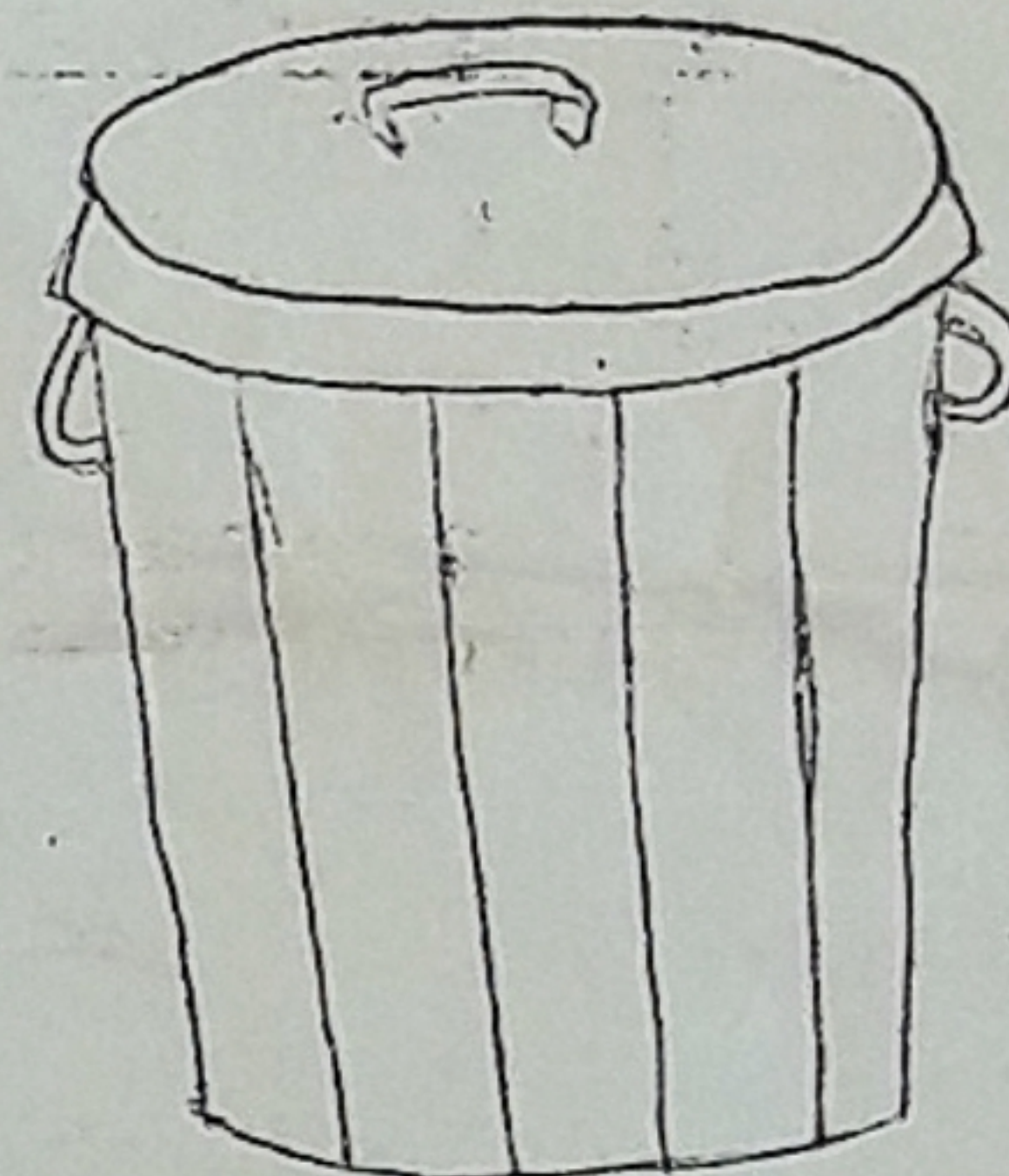
Composting is man's imitation of the natural process of decomposition vividly described by Walt Whitman. If you put your organic kitchen garbage and garden refuse in a compost heap instead of into the city dump you will turn it into a rich fertilizer for your garden instead of a pollutant of the Bay.

Although a compost heap may attract pests, such as rodents, dogs, and flies, it is easy to make a heap so that it will cause no offense. Your main safeguard is common sense. Watch your heap, cover it if it smells, with a layer of dry leaves, or black plastic (25¢ a foot at hardware stores). If it attracts flies hang a strip of fly paper above it (10¢ a strip at the Co-op variety store). When you go on vacation be doubly sure your heap is safe from pests.

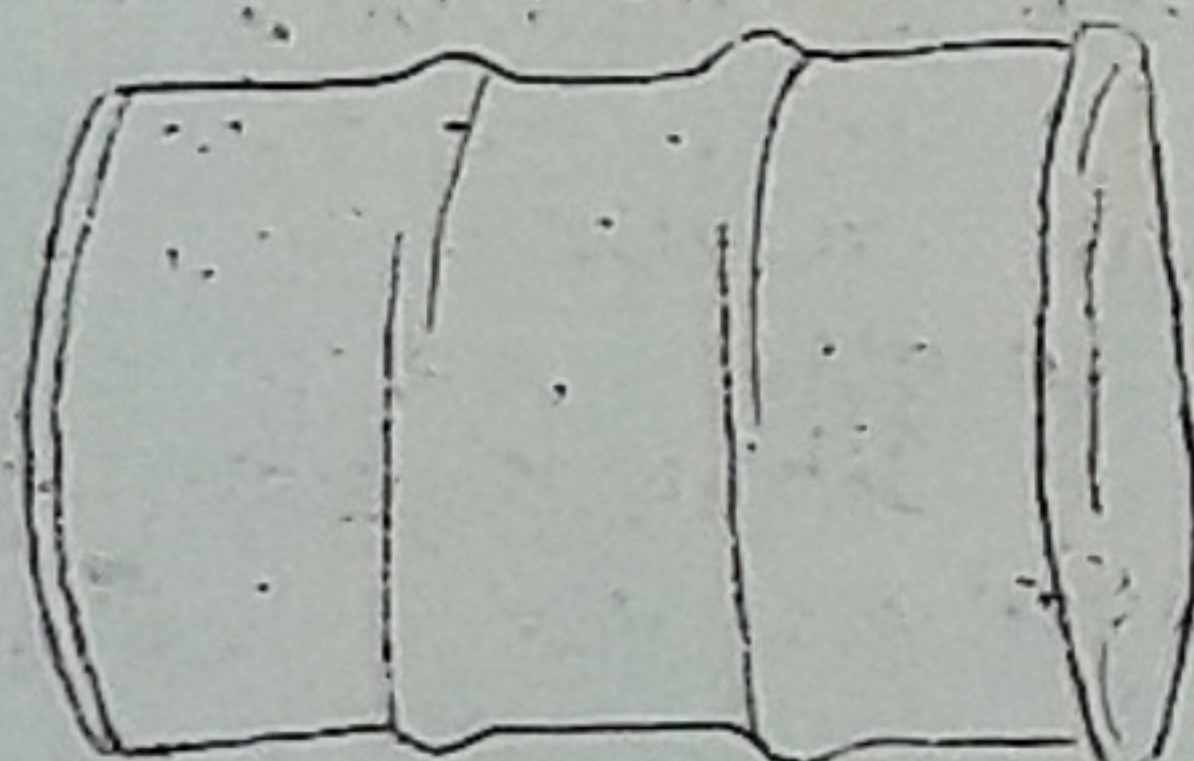
The chemistry of composting is complicated, and varies according to the method of composting and the ingredients of the compost. A heap five feet high and five feet across should heat up to a temperature high enough to kill many weed seeds and disease-causing organisms, thus producing a kind of natural pasturization of the compost. The value of the compost as fertilizer also varies, but however it compares to commercial fertilizers in chemical content it will improve your soil by adding organic matter which increases the soil's water-absorbing capacity and encourages the growth of many beneficial soil organisms, such as earthworms. Chemical fertilizers kill many of these organisms.

Into your heap you can put all the organic garbage from your kitchen and garden, although you will probably want to leave out woody materials and bones, as these take a long time to decompose. If there is animal matter in your compost you should be extra careful not to attract pests. You can also add hair trimmings, household dust, and wood ashes.

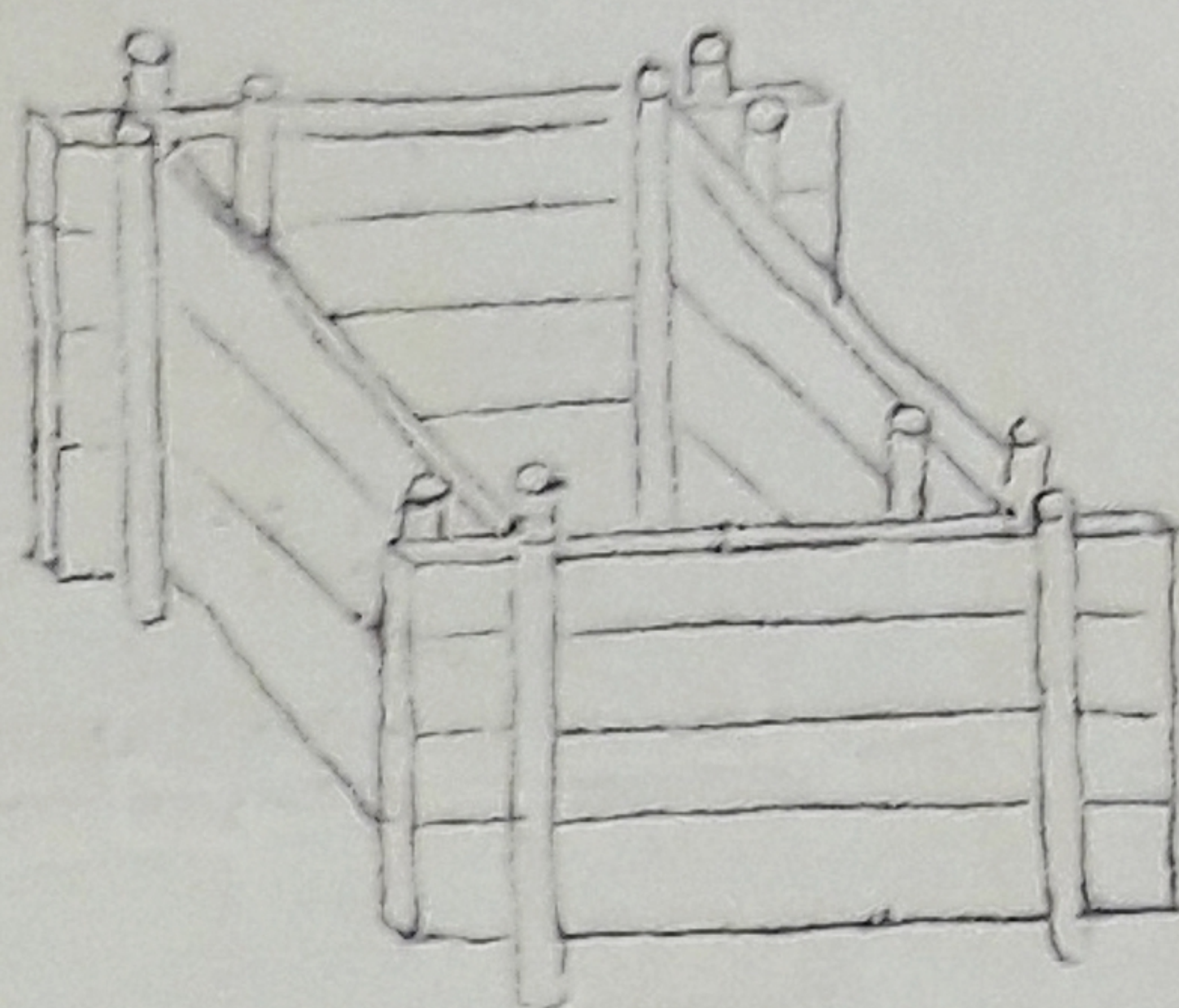
The safest way to compost in the city is in a container. An old garbage can whose bottom is rusted out can be recycled by sinking it in the ground and layering kitchen garbage, weeds, and a little bit of dirt and limestone or wood ashes in it. When the can is full it can be lifted slightly to see if the lower layers are decomposed; if they are they can be scooped out and more layers added to the top. A family may need more than one of these cans. If the garbage is always covered with a layer of dirt and the lid kept on the can, there should be no trouble with pests.



An oil drum with holes punched in the bottom can be used in much the same way. If a lid is fastened on the drum it can be turned over and rolled on its side. This turning will hasten the decomposition.



A large heap can be made in a wooden bin. An especially good heap can be made in a bottomless bin the sides of which can be separated when you want to turn the heap or remove the finished compost. The sides can be made from the sides of old packing crates held in place by poles sunk in the ground. Your kitchen garbage can be layered with dirt in another crate or a garbage can until there is enough for a five foot heap. The heap should be covered with dirt and leaves or black plastic. It should be kept moist but not soggy, and should be turned every few weeks.



You can also make compost in a strong black plastic bag, if you keep it in a place where dogs can't get at it, such as your basement or garage.

These methods of composting will take several months, but you can compost in a few weeks if you shred your compost and turn it often. You can grind your kitchen garbage with a meat grinder or a blender, or chop it by hand. The Organic Gardening and Farming Magazine advertises an attachment that will salvage the ground garbage from your garbage disposal. You can buy motor-run compost grinders, or you can grind your compost with an electric or rotary mower.

A heap made with ground garbage is much less likely to attract pests because the garbage decomposes so rapidly. If you don't have time to make a compost heap you can bury the ground garbage under six inches of firmly packed soil and it will decompose very rapidly.

If you can't grind your compost but are eager to use it, let it decay slowly and meanwhile make use of some other organic fertilizer or mulch. Spread leaves, lawn clippings, wood chips, pine needles, tea leaves, or coffee grounds around your growing plants for a mulch that conserves moisture, restrains weeds, and slowly fertilizes the soil. You can get free leaf mold from the city of Piedmont corporation yard on weekdays. You can get wood chips from tree trimming companies, and you can get both wood chips and lawn clippings from the Berkeley parks department. Ask cafes to save tea leaves and coffee grounds for you; we get five pounds of coffee grounds a day from one lunch counter.

If we've raised questions in your mind about composting, call 843-1820 and we will try to help you. The Organic Gardening and Farming Magazine published by the Rodale Press is an excellent source on the subject, as are The Complete Book of Composting and The Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening published by the same press. Jeanie Darlington's Grow Your Own is out in paperback and is an excellent introduction to organic gardening, especially in the Bay Area.

We would be interested in hearing about different methods of composting, and especially new ways to grind compost. We are now seeing what earthworms can do with compost.

Some Sources of Materials

When you're done with this:

send it to a friend
leave it in a waiting room
tack it up in a laundromat
give it to a garden shop
put it up in a phone booth
or bring it back for
redistribution next time
you come to the
recycling center...

Recycle this!

Cans with lids from bakeries, various sizes for nominal fees. Sturdy boxes from fish markets such as the Tokyo fish market on San Pablo and Gilman, the Goodall Rubber Co. on Grand Ave. in Sth. S. F., the Jamshid Persian Trading Co. on Oxford near Bancroft, and Pier One and City Produce in Oakland. Groceries in S.F. Chinatown.

Ecology Action — 3029 Avenue — Berkeley Calif 94705 — 843-1820.

we need
your
donations
to continue