



**March 10, 2002**

**TO: SAN JOSE ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT**

**FROM: GLS RESEARCH**

**RE: Findings from Compost Focus Groups**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

On behalf of the San Jose Environmental Services Department and under the direction of GLS Research, Paul Goodwin of Goodwin Simon Strategic Research moderated two focus groups with San Jose single-family home dwellers on February 27, 2002. Participants were screened to exclude anyone who makes their own compost. The two groups were held at San Jose Focus, a professional focus group hosting facility.

Both groups employed the same moderator's guide (see attached) for the discussion. Participants were paid \$65 to take part in the focus groups.

The purposes of the focus groups were:

- To explore attitudes about gardening,
- To increase our understanding what San Jose residents know about compost and how they feel about it,
- To determine the most fruitful message platform to motivate residents to become interested in using compost in their garden and on their lawn, and
- To help the city plan a public education effort designed to encourage San Jose residents to use compost in caring for their garden and/or lawn.

As always, the results of focus groups should not be viewed in the same definitive light as the findings from quantitative studies such as telephone surveys. Focus group participants are not selected randomly, and the potential for bias is significant. Instead, focus groups should be viewed as vehicles for assessing the range of feelings and attitudes people might express on an issue, and for exploring the intensity of such feelings.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Each group was comprised of 10 local single-family home residents. Most of the men in the groups did the actual gardening at their homes. Only one or two women in each group appeared to be active gardeners, although many of the other women seemed to play a primary role in deciding what would be planted and where. In each group, one or two people said they hired gardeners to do most of the yard work.

We had a range of ethnic groups represented in each group. In the first group for example, there were three Asian men, plus two Latinas and an African-American man in addition to white participants. In the second group, four were Latino, one was African-American, and two were Asians in addition to the white participants.

Occupations included several in high-tech fields, a stationary engineer, a data analyst, a social worker, a retired military officer, a retired teacher, a paralegal, a mail worker, a food service worker, and a retired secretary.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

In 1998, the city conducted focus groups on composting that found relatively low levels of knowledge about, and interest in, compost and composting. Participants in those groups expressed generally negative views about the process of making compost, and seemed to have little understanding of what it does and how to use it in the garden. The city made the decision to back up in its effort to promote composting, and to educate residents on a more fundamental level about what compost is and how to use it. These focus groups were intended to provide insight to be used in the planning of this public education effort. The goal of this effort is to encourage the use of compost (whether store bought or home made) and not necessarily to encourage backyard composting.

The most evident finding from the 2002 compost focus groups was how much more familiar participants were with the concept of compost. Several individuals in each group were already using it (despite the fact that we screened out any compost makers). Others could describe with some confidence how it is made and had some general idea of its use.

However, while knowledge of compost was wider than in the past, it seemed no deeper than before. At one point in the first group, several people admitted that they had no idea where or how to obtain it. This would suggest that while they may have heard the term and have a cursory understanding of compost, they really haven't been motivated enough to investigate its uses and benefits to the point of seeking it out.

### **About Gardening**

We began each group by asking participants to talk about their experience as gardeners. As we have seen in previous composting groups, many San Jose residents take their garden seriously and invest considerable time and attention to it.

But even the ones who weren't ardent gardeners seem to share something with their green-thumbed peers: a sense that their garden is a personal haven that reveals (or hides) something about themselves to the world.

"It's a sanctuary," said one person, "away from the mean old world." Another said it is like "you are somewhere else."

People used words to describe their gardens such as "calm," "serenity," and "relaxing." This sense of gardens being a refuge from the world really came through clearly. "You forget about all the things around you," said one person.

At the same time, people derived a strong sense of satisfaction by "getting their hands dirty." They feel pride and "a sense of accomplishment" from how their garden looks to themselves and to others. "It makes you feel good," said another.

"It's a reflection of yourself," one person said, and many seemed to agree with that statement. "I'm proud of it but I don't brag," said another. "If the outside of a person's house looks terrible, the inside probably does as well," said one man.

"It's a good feeling looking out the back window," one person summarized, and that seemed to capture the feelings people were trying to communicate. They feel safe and calm in their gardens, they feel pride about their gardens, and they feel good about themselves if they like their gardens. It certainly seems like most people pay attention to their neighbor's garden, compare it to their own, and feel a sense of competition at some level.

### Soil Amendments And Compost

When we asked participants if they use any soil amendments, roughly two people in each group said they are now using “mushroom compost,” which one person described as “food of the Gods.” He said that Payless delivers it to his home. Others mentioned steer manure, lime, potting soil, redwood compost, leaves, and mulch as soil amendments they use.

Most, perhaps 80 percent of each group, appeared to at least be familiar with the term compost. There was some ambiguity about how to use it, although one person did describe it as “like a tenderizer” for the garden. Another said that it “gives plants a healthy jump,” which is a nice phrase.

We asked participants to compare top soil with compost, and the general sense was that top soil is best used for planting lawns, and for gardens with extremely hard soil. “My soil is so poor,” said one person, “that if I don’t dump top soil it won’t grow.”

Compost is an “additive” rather than “the basic deal,” said one man. “You would not plant something in compost period.” “It’s like cream in your coffee,” said another. “A little goes a long way.”

Top-of-mind associations with the term “compost,” included:

- soil
- dirt
- stinky
- plants
- mulch
- flowers
- nutrients
- loosens the soil
- rich
- worms
- ugly, smelly
- like a garden left to rot
- not very attractive
- ripe smelling.

One person summed it up by saying that “basically it’s garbage, but compost is richer because it has vegetable matter.”

When they compared it to things like Miracle Grow, compost was seen as “more natural,” as well as “organic” and “safer than the pesticides.” “It’s healthier, safer, and better for the environment,” said one person.

But one woman sounded a note of caution about compost: “I would not trust what’s in compost from the city.” In fact, this came up in both groups, with another person saying that the city’s compost is “terrible” and “dry.” But in one group, when asked if they would trust the city or a private company more when it comes to compost, the clear consensus was that the city’s compost would be better. No one mentioned anything about recent news stories warning of herbicides in compost.

Other objections to compost were the perceived smell and appearance. “It would not look nice in my back yard,” said one person. This appears to be the result of confusion between ready compost and compost being made. In fact, throughout both groups there was confusion between compost as a noun and verb.

The term “rot” was seen as a clear negative in the one group where we asked about it. “It gives a negative connotation of what compost is,” said one man. “It does not sound pleasant,” said another woman. “It sounds like fertilizer and fertilizer I would not touch.”

Another concern mentioned several times was that compost would burn the roots of plants.

### **True/False Test For Statements**

We gave participants a handout with eight statements about compost, and asked them to indicate whether each statement was true or false. Individuals could also choose “don’t know” if they weren’t sure. The participants “true/false” responses are summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Responses When Asked if Each Statement is True or False**

	6:00 Group		8:00 Group	
	True	False	True	False
A. Using compost helps protect your family's health because you wouldn't need to use toxic chemicals on your lawn and garden	6	3	6	0
B. Using compost in your garden makes any produce from your garden taste better	1	2	3	1
C. Using compost on your lawn and in your garden will make it easier to weed and otherwise maintain	3	5	6	2
D. Using compost on your lawn and in your garden will increase their beauty by improving the overall health and vigor of your grass and plants.	10	0	8	0
E. Using compost is better for the environment because it allows you to use fewer chemicals, save water and recycle green waste.	10	0	9	0
F. Using compost will cost you less to develop and maintain your lawn and garden.	6	0	5	2
G. Using compost reduces run-off from your lawn and garden which can carry chemicals like herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers to local streams and the Bay	7	0	5	0

It's clear from this exercise that there are two messages that seem most believable:

- That composting is better for the environment, and
- That composting will increase the beauty of your lawn and garden.

Several other statements are seen as probably true, but many people just are not sure:

- That composting reduces runoff to the Bay,
- That composting will cost you less
- That composting protects your family's health by eliminating the need for toxic chemicals.

There is far less credibility regarding claims that compost will improve the taste of any fruits or vegetables grown in the garden, and that it will make the lawn easier to weed. There were sizable proportions who felt that these statements were false, which suggests that they are not currently viable directions for the Department's message development efforts.

Regarding whether or not compost will eliminate the need for toxic chemicals, there was skepticism that is derived from the lack of understanding of how to use compost. One person said “It does not solve every problem.” Another said that “you still might need to spray [pesticides or fertilizer, presumably].” Another asked how you know if compost “is right for your plants?” This comment seems to be engendered by confusion regarding how to use compost, and for what purposes. Participants were simply unsure about its role in the garden, and thus any claim that it is a substitute for other better known and understood garden products is hard to follow.

Regarding whether or not compost will help reduce runoff into the Bay, this is simply not something that people understand. It’s a complicated argument that far exceeds most people’s understanding of compost and runoff.

### **Persuasion Ranking Test For Statements**

After assessing the believability of the statements, and being told that all the statements were in fact true, participants were asked to identify the statements they felt were most persuasive, second most persuasive, and third most persuasive. As shown in Table 2 below, three statements received substantial support as “most” persuasive:

- That using compost would help protect the health of one’s family (6 in one group chose this as the top item, but none in the other group chose it),
- That using compost would increase the beauty of your lawn and garden, and
- That using compost is good for the environment.

**Table 2: Responses When Asked to Identify the Most Persuasive Statements**

	Most Persuasive		2 <sup>nd</sup> Most		3 <sup>rd</sup> Most	
	6:00	8:00	6:00	8:00	6:00	8:00
A. Using compost helps protect your family's health because you wouldn't need to use toxic chemicals on your lawn and garden	0	6	1	0	2	1
B. Using compost in your garden makes any produce from your garden taste better	0	0	0	1	0	0
C. Using compost on your lawn and in your garden will make it easier to weed and otherwise maintain	1	0	0	2	0	1
D. Using compost on your lawn and in your garden will increase their beauty by improving the overall health and vigor of your grass and plants.	3	3	3	2	1	2
E. Using compost is better for the environment because it allows you to use fewer chemicals, save water and recycle green waste.	4	0	3	3	1	3
F. Using compost will cost you less to develop and maintain your lawn and garden.	1	0	1	1	0	0
G. Using compost reduces run-off from your lawn and garden which can carry chemicals like herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers to local streams and the Bay	1	1	2	1	5	3

Of these messages, the environmental message (E, not G) seemed easiest for people to champion as persuasive. "I want to make the world a better place for my children," said one woman. Another liked the idea of saving water, and of recycling the materials.

The message that composting will improve the beauty of the garden was also considered quite persuasive. Perhaps because it appeals directly to the benefits they derive from their gardens and the sense of self-satisfaction that they feel from having a "beautiful" garden.

It seems clear that both the "being good for the environment" and "increasing the beauty of the lawn or garden" statements represent message themes that could be utilized to pique interest in using compost. Both statements seem to be universally accepted as believable and are considered very persuasive. The statement concerning "protecting your family's health" also seemed to have considerable persuasive power, perhaps because it was contrasted to using "toxic chemicals." However, this statement was not deemed nearly as believable as the other two statements.

While "environmental" or "beautification" messages show considerable potential to pique interest in compost, neither message will necessarily lead to greater compost use without an attendant well-crafted educational component. In other

words, if we simply tell people to use compost because it is a superior garden product (compared to top soil, fertilizers, etc.) or that it is better for the environment, we necessarily assume that people are reasonably familiar with what it is, how to use it, and what to use it for. (As one person asked, “What will it do?”) We could not expect increased compost usage without also addressing these substantive questions.

These focus groups provided mixed evidence on these questions. People seem more familiar with compost than in the past, but are still confused about how to use it and what specific gardening benefits it might provide. However, they do seem to accept quite easily the environmental benefits from its use and the prospect that it will increase the beauty of their lawn and garden.

In one group, after the “true/false” and “persuasiveness” exercises about the compost statements, we made a list of attributes that people mentioned as they discussed the benefits of compost. These attributes included:

- Safe
- Natural
- Effective, and
- Easy to use.

Six people felt that its safety was most important to them. The other attributes were seen as important by one person each.

What this may suggest is that the environmental message really implies more than just being “good” for the earth, but also that it is safe for the planet, safe for families, and safe for use in the garden if you should handle it. While it seemed that people did not understand why it was safe exactly, no one in these focus groups wanted a detailed answer to why it is safer.

Late in one group, we made a list of questions people have about compost. These included:

- How does it save water or chemicals?
- How far does the smell permeate?
- When do you know if it is done?
- How do you make it?
- Where do you get it?
- Will the heat kill plants?
- What is it good for?

This brief list of questions is illuminating. What we see is confusion about the nature of compost, lingering concerns about smell, concern about its use, lack of understanding of how or why it would reduce the need for chemicals, and perhaps most importantly, a lack of knowledge about where to buy it. In fact, five people in this group did not know where to obtain compost.

This relative lack of knowledge about this most basic fact gives pause. As the City correctly assessed before these groups, San Jose residents need a lot more information before they are likely to obtain and use compost in significant amounts.

We concluded the groups by asking participants where they might get credible information about compost. Responses included:

- TV shows like Home and Garden network and Martha Stewart
- The internet
- From good gardeners who use compost
- From nurseries

## CONCLUSIONS

Several underlying themes about compost can be distilled from these groups:

- First, while awareness levels about compost are probably higher, most people still have only a vague understanding of what it is and how to use it.
- Second, there is confusion about compost as a noun and composting as a verb. People don't seem to understand that you can buy the stuff and use it. It seems to be thought of more as an action you can take to help the environment, but few seemed to understand what you would do with the end product.
- Third, a lot of people do not know where or how to obtain it. If people don't understand what the product is, don't know for what purpose to use it, and finally don't know where or how to obtain it, it seems unlikely to expect an increase in compost usage based solely on a message strategy to pique interest in compost.
- Fourth, there remains a lot of negative connotations about composting, ranging from concern about what it smells and feels like to a sense that it could burn sensitive plants if not used properly.

These are serious considerations that will most likely hamper greater acceptance and use of compost.

At the same time, compost has acknowledged and value advantages that make it desirable. These advantages include:

- It's good for the environment, which is very important to San Jose residents. They really don't need to know much more than that, at least not at first.
- It really works, which is important given the level of devotion to the garden that we observed.

However, to increase usage of compost, people need answers to the following questions:

What does compost do?

- You use it for your lawn and garden to make it grow better.

Why is it good?

- It's good for your garden, and more effective than fertilizers and other soil amendments.
- It's good for the environment.
- It's safe and natural.

Where do I get it?

- You can buy it at your nursery or Home Depot (assuming this is true – if it only comes as part of a mix of other soil amendments, then people need to know that they have to read the label and look for it).

Needless to say., this is a lot of information to transmit. It seems as though a series of messages will be necessary to both motivate and educate. These messages must be transmitted both to ardent gardeners through targeted advertising, and to the general public (if there is any hope of reaching more casual gardeners).

For example, an advertising campaign designed to achieve these goals might involve a sequence of messages (in print ads or on billboards) like this:

Love Your Garden? Use Compost  
Buy it At your Nursery

Love the Earth? Use Compost on your Lawn and Garden  
Buy It At Your Nursery

Love Your Family? Use Compost on your Lawn and Garden  
Buy It At Your Nursery

Love Your Dog? Use Compost on your Lawn and Garden  
Buy It At Your Nursery

For print ads, each headline could have one or two sentences of copy explaining what it means. For example, the first one could explain:

You don't need fertilizers and chemicals for a great lawn and garden. Instead, just sprinkle an inch of compost on it twice a year [or whatever] and dig it in lightly. It's safer for you and your garden, more effective, and saves you money. Look for it at your nursery.

Obviously the copy would vary, but each one would seek to answer these questions: why use compost, how do I use compost, and where do I get it? This messaging strategy could provide both the motivational and educational components required to precipitate greater compost usage.