

Oregonauthor.com

Jon Remmerde

674 words

Published in *The Christian Science Monitor*

Building Winter Compost

Ash and I started building a garden behind his house. Ash and his wife, Ingrid, went to Nevada to pursue gainful employment, and Juniper, Amanda, Laura and I stayed on as caretakers of their house, buildings, and five acres. I did odd-job work in the area, helped raise our daughters, and continued building garden and landscaping area for more garden.

Northeastern Oregon is often one of the coldest places in the nation, with the shortest growing season. We wanted to have a large garden ready to plant the next spring, so I kept on working when autumn temperatures dropped drastically. I planned to stop for the year only when snow covered the ground.

On a warm day of sunshine, daytime duties kept me busy. It got colder fast when the sun set. We ate dinner, and Juniper and Amanda played together. Wood burning in the heater kept the house warm as the temperature continued to drop. Laura and I read to Amanda and Juniper and tucked them into their beds. The thermometer said fifteen degrees and was still dropping. The full moon climbed the clear night sky. I pulled on my insulated coveralls, laced up my insulated boots, and got my insulated gloves. Laura asked me, "Where are you going?"

"Out to work on the compost. I didn't get a chance to do anything out there all day."

"It's cold out there."

"That's why I'm bundling up."

I read the thermometer that hung on the corner of the garage in moonlight. Eight degrees, and the calendar didn't even say winter yet.

We had hauled in and piled horse manure and rain-spoiled hay in the garden area. As we had time, we mixed those together, with a sprinkling of dolomitic limestone, added water, and the mixture began to decompose into high quality compost we would mix with

the garden soil.

I pitchforked hay and shoveled horse manure into the pile. The moon shone large and golden from the deep sky above me. Stars surrounded the moon, washed pale by the moon's bright light. My breath turned to ice in my mustache and beard as I worked. Occasionally, I heard a car go by on the highway far in front of the house.

Cracker Creek flowed noisily by just beyond the garden. Somewhere up the forested ridge west of the small valley, a great horned owl called, deep-voiced in the clear cold night. Coyotes sang to the moon, to each other, perhaps to me, the only human in the valley who inhabited the cold, outdoor night.

Elaine stopped by to visit with Laura. When she got out of her car and shut the door, she heard me working behind the house. She walked around the house in bright moonlight and asked me, "What are you doing?"

"Building compost."

"In the middle of the night?"

"Compost doesn't care what time it is."

She stood for a moment and watched me pitch hay, put the fork down, pick up the shovel and spread manure over the layer of hay. Then she turned and walked back toward the front of the house, shaking her head.

I drained the hose every time after I used it, so it wouldn't freeze. About midnight, I wet the big pile down again, then covered it with a thick layer of hay. With enough insulation, the organic action in the pile would still heat it up and compost the material.

I left the cold outdoors behind and walked into the warm house. Laura and our daughters slept. I added wood to the heater, took a hot shower, and went to bed. Outside, the moon traveled across the cold sky. Coyotes sang. A great horned owl talked in a deep and echoing voice to the night.

Inside, wood burned in the heater and kept the house warm. We slept and dreamed our way toward winter, toward snow falling on the house, on all the land around, on the mound in the back yard composting through fall and winter toward becoming fertile garden soil in spring.

