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BLEND TRENDS

by Ron Alexander

High quality compost products are versatile in their application and function. This is one reason compost is so popular. However, future market growth may rely its use as a component to other *blended* products. The use of composted products as additives to blended products is not a new idea and, indeed, huge markets have already been developed for their use in this application. Its most popular current application is probably as an additive to topsoil blends, typically used to improve its physical characteristics and increase its organic matter content. The inclusion rate for compost in soil blends is based upon the characteristics of both the soil and the compost, the blends intended use, and economic factors. Typically, inclusion rates range from 10% to as high as 50%. The use of compost in soil blends will undoubtedly expand as sources for high quality topsoil diminish. Various grades of compost may be used in this application, and its use will actually increase the value of the resultant topsoil product. The wholesale value of blended, or manufactured topsoils, have been identified at \$10 - \$25 per cubic yard.

The use of compost in industry specific blends has also been demonstrated, and holds great potential. Specific compost blends for nursery, golf course, and landscape applications have been marketed in various areas of the country. These mixes would be used in very specific applications, and the components of these mixes based on those applications. Typically, these specialized blends have very predictable and uniform characteristics, contain other more expensive ingredients, and therefore possess somewhat high values. For example, blends produced for the nursery industry, which usually contain peat or composted bark products and are used growing media for greenhouse and container crops, can be priced from \$20 - \$40 per cubic yard. Golf Course mixes, which contain high percentages of sand, can be priced from \$15 - 35 per ton. Compost used in golf course, and especially nursery mixes, must be uniform, have predictable characteristics, and possess properties which meet the requirements of that specific market. The final blended products which are to be marketed must also possess these qualities. Blends for special landscape applications, such as raised planters and rooftop gardens, may also be produced and marketed, as may blends ideal for specific crops or environmental conditions. Even the addition of nutrients, pesticides, and biological control agents to compost products is feasible and may allow us to enter new markets. Our ability to expand into these value added, niche markets will be based heavily upon our ability to produce technically and economically acceptable products.

Tremendous opportunity exists for the expansion of compost markets, as well as the improvement of product revenues, by manufacturing blended products. However, developing new products and obtaining acceptance among customers will hold its own set of unique challenges, depending on the market to be accessed.