

Composting: An Environmentally-Friendly Method of Deceased Equine Disposal

the pile release odors that will attract animals, routinely check the compost pile and fill in any cracks or depressions with more manure mixture, either by raking existing mixture over or adding new.

Temperature is indicative of how well your compost pile is doing. When microbes break down the carcass in the pile, they produce heat. It is recommended to check and record compost pile temperatures daily for the first 10 days of composting, then periodically after.

In order to measure the temperature, use a 36-inch stem thermometer, and check at least two locations of the pile, one at 18 inches deep, the other at 36 inches deep. Within the first week after constructing the pile, temperatures should reach 130 to 150 degrees Fahrenheit and remain at these high temperatures for seven to 10 days.

Temperatures will also indicate when the pile is ready to be turned. Once temperatures steadily decline below 130 degrees Fahrenheit, it is time to turn the pile. The compost pile is

typically at temperatures cool enough for turning seven to nine weeks after the pile has been constructed. This timeframe also ensures that most of the carcass has already broken down prior to completing the turning process. Use a skid loader or small tractor to mix and fluff the pile. Then, reform the pile into a mound shape and check for any exposed bones or other parts of the carcass, taking care to cover them. After turning, the compost pile will reheat to temperatures over 130 degrees Fahrenheit once again, and further breakdown in the pile will occur. Finally, the compost pile will enter the cool phase and begin the process of curing. A week or so after turning, pile temperatures will fall below 130 degrees Fahrenheit. The pile enters the cool phase once temperatures fall below 110 degrees Fahrenheit and will remain in this phase for four to five months. Composting materials will continue to break down during this time. Once this curing process is complete, the compost will be more uniform; only some larger bones will remain.

Now What?

A year after beginning the composting process, your compost pile should be odor-free and about one third of the original size. The compost can be used as carbon material for future composting, or it can be applied to the land as a soil additive.

Be sure to remove any large bones left in the compost before applying to land and be aware that, in Maryland, mortality compost may only be applied to the land on the farm where the compost was generated. Also, do not apply the mortality compost on any crops that are going to be consumed by people; stick to hay, corn, winter wheat, tree plantations, and forestland.

Another potential use for the compost is in the planting of a memorial tree for your deceased equine. This tends to be more environmentally-friendly than spreading of ashes, plus allows for a memorial spot to commemorate your horse.

The following sources were used for this article:

- “Constructing and managing a horse carcass compost pile” from the University of Minnesota Extension (<https://extension.umn.edu/composting-livestock-and-poultry-carcasses/horse-carcass-compost-pile>)
- “Equine Disposal Guide for Maryland Horse Owners” from the University of Maryland Extension