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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW BUT YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS WON'T TELL YOU

An editorial piece by Sydney Bacchus, Ph.D.

This article will take you beyond the lighthearted content generally found in *The Radish* and into the scary world of recent actions that can have devastating, irreversible impacts on your cherished gardens and other sources of local food that we're striving to increase.

Euphemistic jargon

This journey requires introduction to euphemistic jargon such as *biosolids*, *landfill* and *wastewater*. *Biosolids* is commonly used by the government to reference municipal sewage sludge, which doesn't sound very appealing. This sludge, the hazardous semisolid part of everything that is diverted to municipal sewage (aka *wastewater*) treatment plants, includes solids and liquids from toilets, drains and industrial waste after it is treated and the sewage discharge is removed. In reality, wastewater primarily is high-quality drinkable water that our municipality pipes into our toilets as a long-distance transport mechanism for our excrement. *Landfills*, originally called dumps, were renamed after becoming highly engineered, expensive holes in the ground to contain our garbage. The term landfill not only is euphemistic; it's a gross misnomer because virtually all land was full before a gaping hole was gouged into it so we would could dump our garbage there.

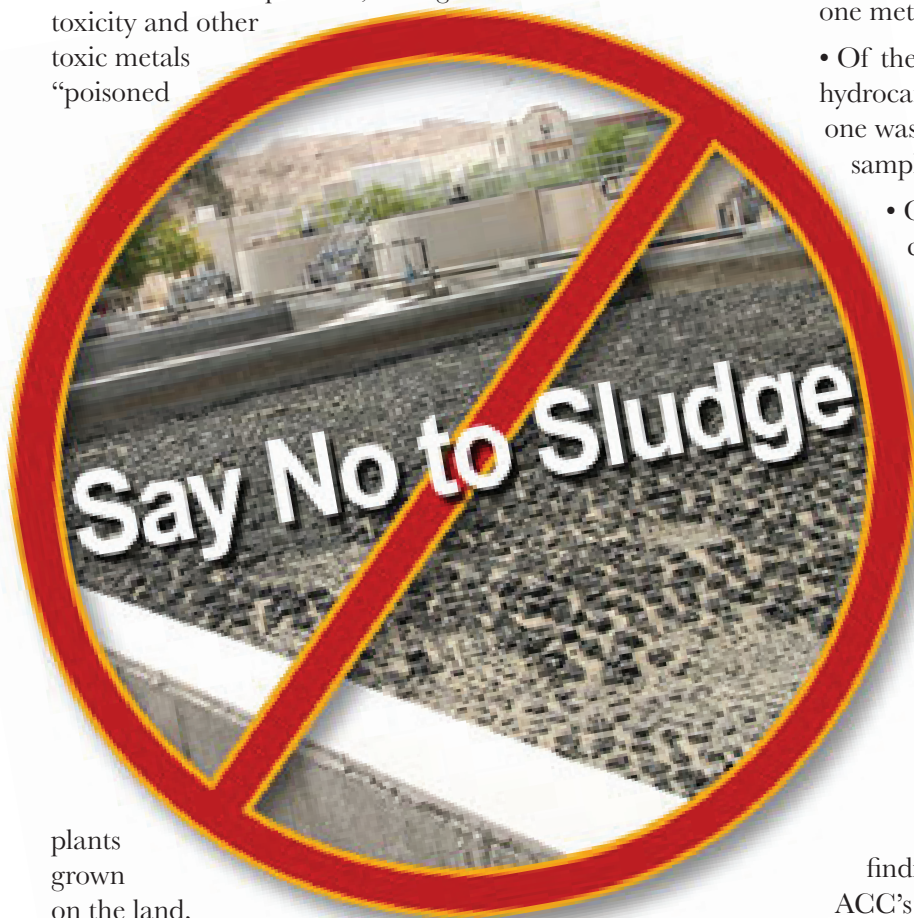
Reverse euphemisms make really great things sound bad, such as the term *yardwaste* to describe valuable leaf and limb material from yards that Athens-Clarke County (ACC) has been collecting, chipping and making available to the public for mulching gardens. What does all of this have to do with your garden and locally grown food? A sneak peek into one part of this multi-pronged problem is provided below.

Disposal – out of sight, out of mind

Municipalities can get rid of hazardous sewage sludge in numerous ways. Cities near the coast previously dumped it into the oceans. In 1976, after years of complaints from scuba divers in New Jersey about ocean dumping of sewage sludge along their coast, a massive fishkill occurred. This elevated awareness of the problem, enabling representatives of their group (e.g., Captain Patrick Yananton) and the American Littoral Society to testify before Congress, resulting in adoption of the Antisludge Dumping Act. That Act required the culprit (New York City) to dump its sewage sludge 105 miles instead of 7 miles offshore until a total ban on ocean dumping became effective after 2005. Those New Jersey residents had no more political clout than anyone else reading this article; they simply complained to their elected officials in ever increasing numbers.

After the ban the most common way of disposing of sewage sludge became dumping it into the dump, which is what ACC has been doing. "In the late 1970s, the treated sewage sludge was rechristened 'biosolids' and a 'land application/recycling' program was started," as described in U.S. District Court Judge Anthony Alaimo's 2008 order (link available in the online version of this article).

That order resulted from a suit filed in January 2005 against the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) by McElmurray family members after their family dairy farm was destroyed by applications of Augusta's sewage sludge, encouraged by the USDA. They had owned and operated that farm near Hephzibah, Georgia since 1938. Aluminum toxicity and other toxic metals "poisoned



plants grown on the land, which were fed

to their dairy cattle, causing the cows to become seriously ill and die," the federal judge's order explains. Their public health concerns led them to test milk produced from their cows, confirming sludge-related contaminants in that milk. It is important to note that both the USDA and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) encourage land application of sewage sludge on agricultural fields and are required by law to regulate aspects of those actions. Contaminants such as aluminum and other toxic metals are not unique to Augusta's sewage sludge, but are common in municipal sewage sludge. This fact was emphasized in the 2009 published results of USEPA's testing of 74 sludge samples representing more than 3,300 publically owned treatment works (POTW) throughout the U.S. conducted between August 2006 and March 2007. Samples were tested for nitrite/nitrate, fluoride, water extractable phosphorus, 28 metals, four polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, two semivolatile chemicals, 11 polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs), 72 pharmaceuticals, and 25 steroids and hormones. Some of the results USEPA documented from the sewage sludge samples include the following:

- 20 pharmaceuticals were detected at 90% or more of the POTWs in the target population.
- Nitrite/nitrate, fluoride and water-extractable phosphorus were found in every sample.
- 27 metals were found in virtually every sample, with one metal (antimony) found in no less than 72 samples.
- Of the six semivolatile organics and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, four were found in at least 72 samples, one was found in 63 samples, and one was found in 39 samples.
- Of the 72 pharmaceuticals, three (i.e., cyprofloxacin, diphenhydramine and triclocarban) were found in all 84 samples and nine were found in at least 80 of the samples.
- Of the 25 steroids and hormones, three steroids (i.e., campesterol, cholestanol and coprostanol) were found in all 84 samples and six steroids were found in at least 80 of the samples.
- All of the flame retardants except one (BDE-138) were found in nearly every sample; BDE-138 was found in 56 out of 84 samples.

ACC's NEW disposal idea for sewage sludge

Despite the McElmurrays' tragedy and the findings of USEPA's 2009 report referenced above, ACC's bold new plan to dispose of municipal sewage sludge is to mix it with the highly desirable, beneficial leaf and limb material, aka yardwaste, and sell the contaminated mixture to the unsuspecting public. Like the McElmurray disaster, this approach increases areas contaminated by municipal sewage sludge.

Unlike the McElmurray disaster, there will be no record of all of the new locations where the contaminated material is disposed if ACC moves forward with this plan. This proposed approach of sewage sludge disposal by ACC also destroys our community's most valuable natural resource for increasing locally grown organic food and conserving water in our gardens – our leaf and limb compost. In fact, ACC's proposed new approach for sewage sludge disposal may explain why my repeated pleas for ACC to provide chipped leaf and limb material to the Southeast Clarke Park area to create community gardens fell on deaf ears.

What we can do

We can take similar action as the residents of New Jersey, who helped stop ocean dumping of sludge by increasing

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(Know, cont. from 7) public awareness of the problem. Suggestions include:

1. Distribute the link for the online version of *The Radish* with this article to as many people as possible (visit dailygroceries.org/radish).
2. Provide a hard copy of the article to people without access to a computer.
3. Spread the word via guest editorials, blogs, tweets, Facebook, signs and bumper stickers.
4. Send emails and call the mayor or commissioners to ask why they are allowing our mulch and community property to be contaminated by sewage sludge (contact information at athensclarkcounty.com/commission).
5. Ask each candidate running in the November election how he or she would prevent this contamination of our community from occurring.
6. Ask your neighborhood association, garden club, community garden group, church, synagogue and any other relevant group to express concern to the mayor and commissioners.
7. Ask those groups to consider purchasing a commercial-scale chipper to allow members and others to chip the limbs that otherwise would be left for ACC pickup, for use in neighborhood gardens and to prevent it from being contaminated with sewage sludge (consider mobile units to chip limbs of community members for a fee).
8. If you are aware of leaf and limb material in your neighborhood that isn't wanted, contact community gardens and local organic farms to arrange for them to get the material.

Citations for this article linked to its online version.

Product Spotlight

by Walt Swanson

Reduce, Reuse and Style

Being eco-friendly should be a lifestyle choice. More people are donning reusable bags for everyday shopping. With this influx of attention, the next step in tote-ware is to get eco-friendly with the materials. This is one area manufacturers are beginning to address by taking reusable materials like organic cotton, hemp and even recycled packaging, and completely refashioning them to provide an eco-friendly alternative. This is all in an attempt to depend less on environmentally harmful plastic bags, which would be no small achievement.

According to bagsgogreen.com, "Each year almost a billion plastic bags are used in America. Most are used just once and then end up in landfills where they will take as many as 400 years to disintegrate into tiny, toxic particles. And it's been estimated it takes over 12 million gallons of oil to produce those plastic bags."



Daily Groceries Co-op is proud to say it has only utilized previously used bags for its eighteen year history. We are also proud to have so many customers that make an effort to reuse, reduce and recycle.

Going Eco-Chic With ChicoBag

The ChicoBag Company (Chicago, Ill.) has turned recycled materials into its all-new ChicoBag rePETe. This bag features fabric and drawstring produced from recycled plastic bottles – averaging about seven recycled bottles per bag – with a cordlock made from recycled polyurethane and a carabiner clip made from recycled aluminum. It is available in five colors with two-toned accents.

ChicoBag is a member of Green America's Green Business Network and they even have a program to use worn-out bags to make rugs. They also pay a fair wage to all their workers as members of the Fair Labor Association. Additionally, ChicoBag offers a fundraising program to schools who are interested in raising money and awareness.

For info go to ChicoBag.com.