

MIXING IT UP

Make your customers more interested in composting this spring. Composting expert Gail Loos says it's time to dispel myths and turn to the kids.

By Pete Mihalek

Gail Loos has compost tea running through her veins. And that's exactly why she is the co-founder and president of Ecotonix, a company that designs innovative organic waste reduction products for gardeners and environmentally conscious consumers. She is the inventor of the Green Cyclor, a countertop pre-composter.

Like you, Loos knows just how beneficial compost can be for your customers' gardens — and has a few ideas to help get composting on a few more honey-do lists this spring and beyond.

In this question-and-answer, Loos says the way to make composting work for you is by keeping it simple, young and visible.

L&GR: *If you were a lawn and garden retailer, how would you bring more attention to composting in your retail space?*

Gail Loos: My big local garden center only sells 12 composter tubs a year. There are a lot of misconceptions out there about composting, one of which is, simply, people don't compost. That's just not true. The National Gardening Association estimates that over half of all gardeners already compost. My main concern, to start, would be: Are they doing it successfully? Make an effort to educate and simplify the process.

So many people treat it too scientifically. It's

about balance. You really have to treat it like your body. Mix it up. You wouldn't eat 100 percent of ice cream or 100 percent of Christmas cookies. It's really not that difficult. I believe we have a tendency to make it harder than it needs to be. Compost is like eating a balanced diet. It builds your soil. Garden success starts with healthy soil — and that's how you can position [composting] as a solution.

Another misconception is a compost pile has to sit for a year. People treat it like it's wine. The longer it sits the better it gets. That's not always the case when a pile is exposed to the elements, the water-soluble minerals escape. If a customer is making it with things from their own home and they know what's in there, they can put it to work very quickly, keeping all of those nutrients.

L&GR: *Is there a demographic showing interest in composting that retailers may not be tapping into?*

Loos: Kids 12 and under. We've done a ton of trade events and public facing shows, and it's really amazing how many kids know what composting is. A lot of schools are composting. They're making it a part of science class curriculums, particularly. They get it. It's so important to engage this youngest generation with things on their level. Make an attempt to be the one assisting with these programs at your

local schools.

With our products, we get lots and lots of teachers sharing pictures with their classes making compost. Kids are really into it and if kids are into it, their parents will spend the money.

L&GR: *Composters and associated products are not known as eye-catching merchandise. Do you have any display suggestions to combat this?*

Loos: Continue with the elementary school students theme. Having them use your products successfully is the perfect testimonial. If kids can be successful composters, there's no reason your customers can't, right?

I know compost bins are typically stored in the back and or not in plain sight. Bring one up front and put it to work so everyone can see. Back it up with some handmade signage — like a science fair display poster. Make it feel homey. And encourage shoppers to put their waste in it — especially if you have a cafe or food element to your store. Merchandise the display with supplemental products: compost tea, starters, earthworms and books.

One of Amazon's best-selling children's books on gardening topics is *Worms Eat My Garbage* (by Mary Appelhof). It goes to show that this concept, this garden solution, is more widely accepted than we might give it credit for. **L&GR**

Photos provided by Gail Loos, www.thegreencycler.com

