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June 22, 1995

Cambridge City Council
City Hall
Cambridge, MA

Councillors:

At the last meeting of the City Council, some issues were raised concerning home composting and its relationship to rodent problems experienced in at least one section of the city. I would like to clarify the situation with a few observations based on several years of experience in promoting home composting in Cambridge.

First, the notion that the existence of compost piles, either open or within a composting unit, draws rats is pure myth. Either rats are there or they are not. These are Cambridge resident rats. The issue is one of *feeding* these rodents, not drawing them. It's not as though a group of rats in Dorchester say, "Hey, Willard, I hear there's good eats on Standish St. in Cambridge. Wanna hop on the Red Line for dinner out tonight? I hear they've got great moldy bread and rotting bananas!" Safe haven and available food is what causes rat populations to grow. Restaurant and institution dumpsters are notorious feeding grounds for urban rats. Proximity to sewers, drains, and other underground structures is probably the number one predictor of the existence of rats. When streets are opened or other underground construction takes place, there is often an increase in the sighting of these rodents.

Second, once we've established that rats exist already, there is the issue of how best not to feed them in order that their population steadily declines. Given the choice between a plastic trash bag filled with trash and garbage only a few days old, and a composter with thick plastic walls and containing largely humus and barely recognizable decomposed organic material, the truly discriminating rat will choose the garbage bag and leave the composter to the worms and creepy-crawlies. Closed home composting units are far more likely to reduce rat populations than increase them.

State law allows for home composting of leaf and yard waste under essentially all circumstances. In urban areas, food waste composting is not permitted unless it is within approved animal-proof, rodent-resistant composting units. In our program, we go a step further and only sell composters which are highly resistant to rodents. Our number one seller, the Earth Machine, comes equipped with a screen for underneath the composter to prevent critters from burrowing under to access the pile. Our next big seller, the Soilsaver, has an optional base to prevent rodents from entering. We provide the bases for free if there is any evidence of rodent activity.

Regarding the matter of what one should and should not put into a compost pile, here are the basics: No meat, no bones, no fats, no pet waste. This doesn't mean that tragedy will befall you if a little meat gets into the pile. The main problems with meats, bones and fats is that flies like to lay eggs in it (you don't want to know about this, believe me) and dogs may try to tear into the composter to get at the meat. We have had a few incidents of dogs tearing open composters. Fats, grease, and oils can lead to odor problems, though small amounts are generally harmless.

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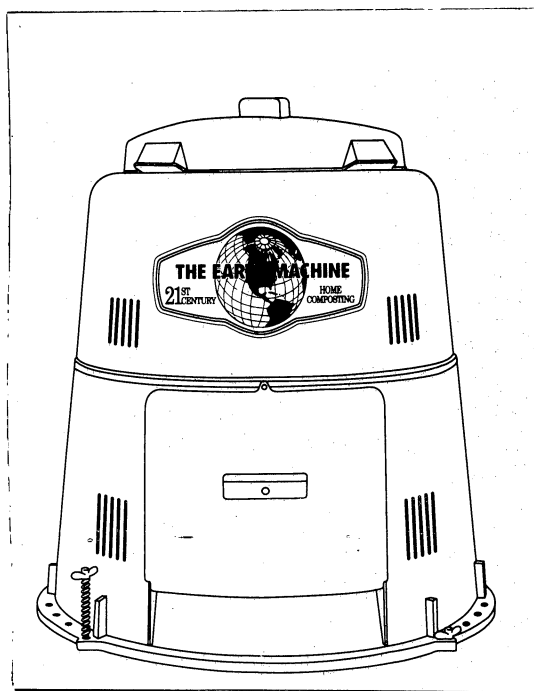
Though the existence of meat, meat by-products, bones, fat, grease, peanut butter, oils, bread, dairy products, and cooked foods may be desirable to rats, raccoons, and other rodents, the one thing you want to keep out of your compost pile is the rodent itself.

A composter with a balance of greens (including food waste) and browns, just enough moisture to remain damp but not wet, and proper aeration will cause optimal decomposition and little or no odor. It's easy, it's interesting in an offbeat sort of way, and produces an excellent soil amendment. We recommend burying new material into the pile rather than tossing it in on top. This is to reduce fruit fly activity, not rodent activity.

If there's any message I'd like you to take to your constituents it is just this: Don't feed the rodents. If you don't compost your food waste, then make sure your trash cans have secure lids and use them. If you do compost your food waste, don't do it in an open pile or in a container that rodents can penetrate. You can now get an approved composter for \$16 through the City. Using one of these home composters is one of the best ways of *preventing* rodent infestations.

Sincerely,

Robert Winters



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Consent Comm. # 7

SC 234

Comm. from Robert Winters regarding
home composting as it relates to rodent
problems.

In City Council,

June 26, 1995

Placed on
file