

Animal composting has always been available to farmers, Santini said - they just never had to do it. The materials needed to compost, she said, are already on the farm - organic materials like manure mixed with bedding and plant materials. At Mill Hill, Sarrah Biddle said, they put excess feed into the compost and also use the piles to dispose of placentas and aborted fetuses.

"It's low maintenance, and it's an economical way of dealing with mortalities," said Josh Biddle, dairy herd manager at Mill Hill Farms.

The process starts with site selection. The compost pile should be 200 feet from any water source and shouldn't be placed next to the barn or other buildings. The base of the pile should be at least 2 feet deep, and the animal should be covered by at least 2 feet of compost material on all sides.

"If you build it properly, there's no odor [of decay]," Santini said. "That's what keeps people away from trying to compost. ... But it'll smell like whatever you built the pile out of. There's no scavengers, coyotes, buzzards. The pile just looks like a manure pile."

Josh Biddle said turning the pile may speed up the composting process, but it also allows some odors to escape.

Burial is another free option for farmers, but the state Department of Agriculture recommends composting.

"Six feet deep is the going rule of thumb for burial," Santini said. "It takes a long, long time for a cow to rot in the ground, and there's limited space in the ground."

It's illegal to dump the animal in the woods, Santini said, because it could contaminate water sources and spread disease through scavengers.




In a compost pile, Santini said, most of an adult dairy cow will decompose within six to nine months, depending on the weather, though the bigger bones like the skull and pelvis will take longer. At Clover Creek, Rice incinerates the bones in his wood stove; at Mill Hill, the Biddles bury them.

The state Department of Agriculture offers seminars on on-farm composting. For more information, call Santini at 946-7315.

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