

# Managing the Manure

By Bev Henry

**T**he dark and secret places under dung piles harbor all sorts of nasty critters. And although these piles may be surrounded by lush grass, it is unpalatable to llamas. The grass no doubt has a bitter taste caused by high levels of nitrates from the nitrogen-rich urine soaked into the soil around the dung.

It is good pasture management policy to get rid of these piles, or at the very least, scatter them and expose the critters to the light of day.

We keep around twenty or so llamas on our farm and they produce a substantial volume of manure. Collecting it is a time-consuming chore. A small tractor would certainly be an asset but at the moment we are simply gathering it by hand with a rake, shovel & wheelbarrow. Keeps us fit in our dotage.

So once it's gathered, what do you do with it?

Many people we know sell their llama manure, either by the truckload or in small bags, but we would not dream of selling a



*Morden Sunrise Roses thrive on llama tea*

product so generously produced and so conveniently deposited by our clever camelids. We pile and compost it, and consider it a valuable farm resource. Finished compost is rich, dark and crumbly stuff, redolent of freshly-dug earth.

Composting is a process involving bacterial decomposition of organic matter and when the pile is working properly, considerable heat is generated during this process. The relatively high temperature in the composting pile reduces fly populations by killing eggs and larvae, destroys the eggs of many intestinal parasites, and kills weed seeds.<sup>(1)</sup>

Spreading finished compost in the sunlight further sanitizes the stuff.

We pile manure in one corner of each paddock.

We seem to achieve

a better composting action by adding layers of raked-up hay or old straw bedding between layers of manure. Fall leaves are great for layering as well, and any grass clippings or garden trimmings can be added. The compost pile absorbs it all.

We try to pick up manure on a regular basis, but with our long and cold Canadian winters it is not possible to get it all. Pellets freeze solid, or are buried by heavy snowfalls, so the remainder is gathered in the spring. Manure piled during spring clean-up or in wet weather rots down nicely into a lovely, useable compost. It seems to take about two years to complete this process so we always have two piles on the go – one current and one from the previous year, packed down and working. Turning the pile from time to time helps in the composting process. Aeration of the pile seems to increase bacterial activity.

Our finished piles are roughly 4' high, and the llamas often assist in the compacting by using the mounds to play King of the Castle. I don't think husband Barry sees this activity as 'assisting' though, because I saw him chasing a couple of youngsters with the shovel one day, yelling unprintable words and mumbling about the shape of his nice tidy piles being spoiled by their shenanigans. So ideally, I suppose it would be best to have these compost piles in a separate area, and covered to prevent leaching out of the nutrients.

Composted manure is ideal for lawns, gardens and pasture. Although relatively





Shaman and Viva playing King of the Hill on the dung pile

also functions as a buffer, to balance the acidity/alkalinity of the soil. Plant uptake of most nutrients is enhanced when soil pH is neutral.

Composted manure spread on the fields in the fall greatly contributes to increased grass production the following spring, and our llamas don't hesitate to graze these areas. When we moved here the pastures were dusty and barren, with patchy moss and very little grass. Now, in the areas where we've spread the composted manure, and with no tilling or re-seeding, the grass is lush and green.

During hot summer days, 'llama beans' dry in the sun and will not readily compost due to the scant moisture content. The compost pile can be sprinkled with water to get it going, or the dry pellets can be gathered and run through a garden debris shredder. Pellets must be quite dry to do this though, or they will jam the shredder. A dust mask is essential for health and safety.

Shredded pellets are wonderful additions to flowerbeds and the veggie garden, and make a perfect mulch to protect plantings from winterkill.

low in available nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium (the three main ingredients of commercial fertilizers), manure is rich in trace nutrients and is a most valuable soil amendment, greatly increasing the 'workability' and the all important moisture holding capacity of your soils. Composted organic matter

'Manure tea' is another useful by-product – roses love it. (You may even be tempted to offer a cup to relatives who have out-stayed their welcome.) I always have a bucket steeping for use in my flower beds. Toss a shovelful of llama beans in a 5-gal. pail, fill with water, and use the liquid to water your flowers. Refresh from time to time, and empty the pail in the veggie garden when the sludge builds up.



Amor enjoying the benefits of a paddock that has been generously treated with compost

So many uses for this byproduct of our beloved camelids. Brings a whole new meaning to the old phrase "Up to your knees in...ummm...manure."

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**Reference**

1. Susan M. Stehman, Christine Rossiter, Patrick McDonough, and Susan Wade. 1996. "Potential Pathogens in Manure."

**About the Author:**

Bev Henry has been involved with pack llamas since 1997 and is now breeding athletic pack stock along with husband Barry in Barrier, British Columbia, Canada. Bev and Barry are focusing on preserving the old style Ccara llamas. Bev comes from a background of a lifetime training and riding performance horses, is an amateur outdoor photographer and an artist who interprets her images in pencil and watercolor.

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