



TRASH TALK

ANN MEHAFFY

Compost: Turn straw into gold

Most of us think of compost as simply a garden soil fertilizer and conditioner we can buy in bags at the store. But small-scale home composting is another important form of recycling, converting waste food scraps and vegetative material into a useful resource. Home composting gives us the opportunity to be our own recyclers while reducing our contribution to the landfill. Composting our own food and garden waste is also cost-effective, by reducing trash collection costs and by producing our own soil additives. It also helps the environment by eliminating the need for commercial fertilizers and by contributing to the health of soil and plants. There is something truly amazing about converting unwanted waste into a highly prized soil conditioner with no or low-level technology.

What is so special about compost, when it is nothing more than decaying plant waste? Simply put, it provides the soil with the things plants want — nutrition, aeration and water retention. Its fluffy richness is the work of billions of microorganisms, and many not-so-micro organisms converting waste into a usable organic material that is rich in humus and microbial life. Compost gives new life to soil by returning to it all the things previous generations of plants have extracted.

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DORY'S DIARY

DOROTHY SWART FLESHMAN

Pondering the din of daily life

The subject of noise came to my ears this day when I ate in a restaurant along with several other tables of folks enjoying themselves.

We were having difficulty hearing one another speak because of the level of sound from voices beyond us and I wondered why we all talked so loudly.

Was it because it was upped to overcome the increasing decimals as we struggled to be heard, already deafened by sound-boxes, or did we consider this public place our private territory where we needn't consider others?

Some voices are naturally louder than others and the distance between us was close so heard more noisily than if we'd been outside.

When I did step outside the door to the fresh air, a train was going through town blowing its horn and I considered the sound ear-deafening in short spurts. No wonder the current argument for and against it was waging. We were too close to the source. But, it was the town in the 1800s that moved old La Grande to resettle by the railroad tracks rather than the other way around. Good for business but not for ears.

Driving in my car I was aware of traffic around me, squeaking stops and rubber-burning starts and vehicles with loud exhausts as well as unmuffled-sounding motors, not part of the earlier scene.

At home on an arterial street, I became aware of the comings and goings of vehicles of all types from those silently gliding by to revved-up motorcycles to large delivery and service trucks, depending on their size and noise quality.

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The Mouth-Watering, Melty Cheese Fun Of Quesadillas



Abel Uribe/Chicago-Tribune-TNS

Quesadillas featuring Monterey Jack cheese on flour tortillas with avocado.

Not Just For Kids

By **JeanMarie Brownson**
Chicago Tribune

By the time these recipes are published, I will have a granddaughter — my first. I do not feel old enough to be anybody's grandmother, but I am thrilled to welcome a new child into our lives.

Another mouth to feed. I can't wait.

Melty cheese of any kind always makes me think of my own children as young ones. Our cast-iron griddle spent a dozen years on the stove waiting for the day's quesadilla orders. My son preferred simple renditions of white cheese and flour tortillas, while my daughter liked more complex combinations of tangy goat cheese and soft vegetables. No matter their age, the children in our house never tired of the warm, handheld goodness.

As they grew up, we added mild guacamole and salsas for dunking. Later, roasted vegetables and shrimp got tucked into the quesadillas. As my prowess in Mexican cooking expanded, so did our quesadilla concoctions. These days, we press fresh corn masa into rounds to welcome boutique cheeses and the garden's squash blossoms. Flour tortillas, quickly defrosted, turn into midnight snacks with leftover roasted vegetables and long shreds of smoked hard cheese.

Two secrets we learned that elevate our quesadillas beyond kids food: First, use the freshest tortillas you can find, such as those delivered daily to a Mexican market. Or, follow the instructions on the package of masa harina to make fresh masa dough, then press out fresh corn tortillas to bake on a heated griddle. Second, skip pre-shredded cheese; the cellulose added to prevent caking also prevents a good melt. It only takes a few seconds to shred a couple of ounces of firm cheese, and



Abel Uribe/Chicago-Tribune-TNS

Goat cheese corn tortilla quesadillas with grilled onions and asparagus.

the rewards are great.

Other warm cheese offerings likewise capture our attention. Saganaki, that Greek kasseri cheese flamed with alcohol, tastes like a salty, carb-free quesadilla. Queso fundido, the Mexican cheese casserole, satisfies our penchant for warm cheese; we happily scoop it up into hot tortillas or over thick corn chips. We feel a similar fondness for chunks of French bread dunked in cheese fondue.

Little wonder then that we ordered the provoleta appetizer everywhere we went in Argentina. La Tablita in El Calafate served our favorite version — a round disk of crusty cheese, soft on the inside, seasoned with fresh

oregano and topped with a tomato, garlic and lettuce salad. We scooped the warm, tangy cheese onto crusty bread and wished the kids were with us. Really.

In Argentina, provoleta is commonly served as the starter at an asado — a traditional, celebratory meal of grilled meats. The sturdy provolone-like cheese often cooks directly on the parrilla, or grill, before it is served on a plate. We also had the specialty served to us in a provoletera, a cast-iron pan dedicated to the cheesy dish. Sometimes, small bowls of chimichurri and olives accompanied the cheese.

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The magnificence of the magnolias

A short time ago I said that I was not finished with winter. I don't know what got into me, as this past winter would have tried the patience of a saint!

Last week I wanted to quote a verse from the Bible, but did not know where to find it. I suspected it was from the Song of Solomon, but was not sure. "Awake, O Northwind and come, thou South, and blow upon my garden that the spices thereof may flow out." The quote is Song of Solomon 4:16. That Bible book could/should be known as the gardening, herb and spices book.

Many beautiful magnolias will grow in our area. Were I rich, I would have a yellow magnolia in my yard. One couldn't ask for more beauty than that.

- Star Magnolia (Magnolia stellata) — zones 1-9. It grows



BETWEEN THE ROWS

WENDY SCHMIDT

to 10 feet high with a 20-foot spread, deciduous. Flowers very early before the leaves. The flowers are white and have 19 to 21 narrow petals. Profuse bloomer in late winter, early spring. There are a group of these similar magnolias. Very useful as large shrubs or at the edge of a woods. The "Rosea" variety is pink. The "Waterlily" variety has broader, more numerous petals. The variety "Rubra" is darker pink and is taller and more tree-like. All of the star magnolias start to bloom at about 3 years of age.

It is surprising how early the star magnolia bloom — even before many of the daffodils in

spring. There are star magnolia blooming all over town now.

- Saucer Magnolia (Magnolia soulangiana) — zones 1-10 and is deciduous. It gets 25 feet tall and has a spread of 25 or more feet. Flowers are generally white to pink to purplish red and about 6 inches across. The saucer magnolia and all its varieties begin their bloom at 3 to 5 years of age.
- Southern Magnolia (Magnolia grandiflora) — zones 4-12, evergreen, to 80 feet high with 40 foot spread. Blooms begin when the tree is 15 years old. Blossoms are 12 inches across and powerfully fragrant. Blooms summer through fall. Variety "Majestic Beauty" has flowers 12 inches across, with nine petals. Variety "Samuel Sommer" has 12 petals and the flower is 10-14 inches across. This group of magnolias can be made to flower in two or three years from grafts.

Choose your planting site carefully, as magnolias are difficult to move once established and many grow quite large. Magnolias need to be staked when young to prevent rocking by the wind, which will damage the tender, fleshy roots. Prevent foot traffic near the plant, as soil compaction damages the roots. Several of the different varieties need wind protection.

Good drainage and deep watering are a must, as is rich neutral or slightly acid soil. Set planting stakes in the hole with the tree, and fashion a watering basin as you backfill. Don't let grass invade the watering basin. The tree should not be set lower in the hole than the soil level it is accustomed to.

Magnolias are valued very much for their large flowers.

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