



by Kristine Johnson



Despite the new curbside compost collection offered by local waste haulers, Boulder residents Dena and Sam Nishek have found ways to complete most of their yard waste cycle right in their very own yard.

What might appear to be garbage to someone else looks like a fine gardening opportunity to this family. Over the past ten years, an assortment of compost bins and a small amount of effort have transformed vegetable trimmings, fruit rinds, egg shells, grass clippings and the like into a rich amendment to their extensive vegetable garden. They started out with a discounted bin provided by the city. Over the years, they added two more bins found either on the curb or picked up through Freecycle (www.freecycle.org). They recently decided to experiment with an uncovered, freeform pile with harder-to-decompose materials like woodier weeds.

The future garden compost starts off in their "best" bin, and as decomposition progresses, the Nisheks turn the maturing compost from one bin to the next. When it reaches the final container, it awaits its fate of being tilled into the garden soil in the spring. There have been very few problems

Dena Nishek in front of the family's compost bins, displaying finished compost.



Freshly collected materials in the compost bin.



Finished compost, waiting to be spread on the garden in the spring.

along the way. Sam reports that they once had to relocate a mouse family, and that this taught them to keep the container lids firmly in place. Otherwise, the process has been fairly easy and takes very little of their time.

Sam and Dena have neatly stacked a final component of their household carbon cycle near their composting operation. The Nisheks installed a high-efficiency fireplace insert in the center of their house.* Any burnable scrap wood and branches from their yard and home go toward reducing their need to fire up their natural gas furnace. While the shift from the annual spring clean-up to biweekly curbside yard waste and compost collection eliminated a major (and easy) source of firewood for the Nisheks, Sam still manages to accrue an extensive reserve of firewood. As they go about their daily lives, whenever the family notices a downed tree or a pruning operation, they get permission to collect any burnable wood for their stash. (This wood likely would have avoided the landfill, however; most Boulder residents and arborists deliver branches and logs to the county's collection facility on Butte Mill Road.) Even the family's 4-year-old, Elli, helps out. When out with

Sam Nishek with the cold frame built with a storm door from the ReSource Yard and scrap lumber.



Spinach inside the cold frame.

Sam in front of his salvaged firewood.



Dena and Sam Nishek's compostable yard waste container, filled with wood scrap unsuitable for burning in their wood stove.

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 Taking kitchen waste out to their compost bin on a starry winter night reminds him to appreciate the beauty of the world around him.

her parents, Elli is quick to point out potential firewood. The Nisheks have even collected several Christmas trees in this manner, though they finally resorted to the purchase of a "vintage" artificial tree from a favorite local shop. Dena reports that counting on windblown Christmas trees is "not always reliable."

While others might shrink from what seems like work, the Nisheks enjoy their endeavors. Sam enjoys the challenge of collecting and splitting wood: "As Henry Ford said, "Chop your own firewood... it will heat you twice." He adds that taking kitchen waste out to their compost bin on a starry winter night reminds him to appreciate the beauty of the world around him.

Composting and burning local wood enriches their garden and heats their home, but it also reduces the amount of garbage they put out on the curb, saving them money on soil amendments, and on their heating and garbage bills. Sam estimates that they burn about 2 cords of (free) firewood every winter and save about \$50 per month on their heating bill. Dena admits that without their compost, they probably wouldn't use synthetic fertilizers or prepared compost; she says they would just have "scrappier vegetables." As a graduate of CSU's master gardener program, she knows that our soil is low in organic matter and

that her compost adds nutrients and aids water retention. She points out that composting doesn't have to take a lot of time or skill, that composting is easy and takes as little or as much time as one wants to put into it.

Additionally, a newly constructed cold frame at the Nisheks shelters a wide swath of spinach and a lone kohlrabi in the front yard. Sam recently built the cold frame from scrap lumber and a \$10 storm door from the ReSource Yard (www.ReSourceYard.org). As he says, "You can't beat the price." It replaces a hastily constructed tent of plastic sheeting, dowels, and old pipes (also salvaged materials), which nonetheless provided the family with greens through December. The current edition has stands better to our infamous winds and keeps the greens remarkably cozy in the February chill.

These resourceful folks even found a good use for the curbside compost program—they fill their container with the remnants of their scavenged firewood that don't burn well, like bark and rotten bits. Rejects from their compost bin—seedy weeds and trimmings from their juniper bushes—will join them in the spring and summer. As Dena says with a laugh, gesturing to the yard waste collection container, "See, even beggars can be choosers." •

* Before installing any wood-burning system, you should contact your local building codes department and local or state health department about wood-burning regulations that may apply in your area.

* Check with your city or trash hauler to see if any yard waste collection options exist in your neighborhood.