



Prefabricated concrete retaining wall blocks section off Jack Vonfeld's two main compost piles. Here he has Karla pull the active pile from the bin to add new grass clippings and kitchen waste to begin the mixing process.  
JIM BLACK PHOTO

## Ka Boom! Composters 2:

# Karla, this Guy's Kind of Girl

In Composters 1, we met Beatrice and her tiny red worms. This column goes much bigger, but the result is the same: black gold.

by Jim Black for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

**J**ack Vonfeld isn't into worms. His passion is equipment and order: everything in its place—and likely put there by a dandy piece of machinery. A former tugboat captain on the Columbia River, Jack wasn't about to be satisfied with an untidy compost pile on his property, no matter how hidden it may be.



As Jack starts the mixing process (above, left), the newly added material appears to resist combining with the older.

Jack repeatedly dumps the mixture, spreads it out, then collects and dumps in again to create a consistent mix of grass, leaves, small branches, and other organic matter (above, right).

JIM BLACK PHOTOS



He and his wife Beverly bought their five acres in West Valley in 2010 after living most of their lives in Portland, Oregon. In the years since, they've developed three of those acres into a paradise of carefully designed and developed flower beds, water features, and an enviable vegetable garden.

But it may be his compost operation that makes him the proudest. Together, Jack and Karla, his frequently washed bright orange Kubota tractor, add limbs, leaves, grass clippings and kitchen waste every Sunday to his active compost pile, spread it, mix it (both by hand and with the tractor's front end loader), add water, then pile it back in the concrete-walled bin.

By making his pile large, about four feet square and three feet high, he is able to achieve the high temperatures needed to kill seeds and bacteria and breakdown the vegetation more quickly. He still avoids placing weeds with seeds that have formed, but if they do make it into the pile, the soil's 100-plus-degrees usually prevents their sprouting. When the composted material is no longer creating the higher temperatures, he runs it through a sieve suspended across an apple bin. Any bits of limbs that don't fall through the sieve are then returned to the emptied concrete bin and a new pile is begun.

Few city dwellers will be able to follow Jack's lead...they simply don't have the room, even if they are enticed to play with power equipment. But for



Once the pile has been spread out on the concrete work area (above, left), Jack manually adds grass from a bin where clippings have been stored.

In the Yakima Valley, adding water to a compost pile is a must (above, right).

JIM BLACK PHOTOS



readers who already have specialized machinery like front end loaders (even if they aren't as pretty as Karla), a large compost pile is a superior way to produce the heat desired to sterilize soils for gardens. It will also produce more soil in less time than small composting sites.



Jack uses this sieve to separate uncomposted materials from his final mix and places the screened out material in the new pile he is starting.

JACK VONFELD PHOTO

Beatrice and Jack exemplify two of the better examples of compost production in our county. Whether you decide to compost in a pile behind your Lilac, or go rogue with the KaBoom crowd, do commit to recycling your kitchen and garden waste. Your plants will dance when you're not looking, and hanging out at the compost bin is a perfect setting for warm, earthy Yakima evenings with friends.



The compost is about ready for use at this stage. Having the space and the equipment to compost large amounts of organic matter is a luxury most gardeners don't have. But, having a friend like the Vonfelds can't hurt.

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