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Eds. – Photos available online:
http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/compost_pics/

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Compost powers USDA's organic People's Garden (despite Chemical Ag's concerns)

WASHINGTON, D.C. – About the time that Chemical Ag spokespeople were chiding Michelle Obama for promoting home-grown organic food with her White House garden, compost from the Rodale Institute farm was landing on a new organic garden right in front of U.S. Department of Agriculture headquarters.

Since he jackhammered an asphalt walkway just off the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in front the USDA's Whitten building, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack has taken a personal interest in developing the new People's Garden.

Delivering the compost was Jeff Moyer, farm director for Rodale Institute, Kutztown, PA. "Compost is a big part of what makes organic farming work so well," he said. "We're happy to donate a truckload of high-quality compost to biologically jump-start this welcome change in the USDA's front lawn. The Secretary wanted the garden to be certified organic, so all the inputs—including compost—need to conform to the National Organic Program standards." Moyer chairs the USDA's National Organic Standards Board, which provides input from the organic sector to the department's organic program.

Despite some reported resistance from within the USDA to give organics such a high profile, Rodale Institute is confident that Secretary Vilsack is making a wise choice in demonstrating new options for American agriculture. Organic farming is an integrated systems-approach to sustainable agriculture that Moyer and thousands of other farmers have been improving for decades. The Institute is the birthplace of the organic movement in America, and its researchers have documented that organic farming techniques offer the best solution to global warming and famine.

"Our 60 years of research show that organic farming is the single most significant and immediate step we can take to curtail the potentially devastating effects of global warming," said Institute CEO Dr. Timothy LaSalle. "Organic farming delivers other environmental services, improves human health and builds biodiversity above and below the soil line to produce more nutrition per acre. Building soil organic matter saves soil, improves water quality and is the building block for greater nutritional density."

Barbara Robinson, acting director of the National Organic Program, and others ready with garden tools when the compost arrived in Washington, remarked at how many earthworms they saw. “The micro-organisms they couldn’t see are just as important in starting to restore the packed subsoil,” explained Jake Blehm, the Institute’s director of operations, who helped with the delivery. “Compost is a package of biological benefits with stable nutrients, active soil microbes and rich humic compounds that will really bring this soil around.”

Board members of the Organic Trade Association (OTA) stopped by during the historic delivery, and even took turns shoveling the rich organic matter. “The OTA is thrilled to see the wonderful visibility of the People’s Garden on the National Mall,” said Christine Bushway, the association’s executive director. “This will be an icon of what the USDA represents for millions of visitors to our nation’s capital. Children and families can see what growing produce looks like, and the project will encourage them to go forward with their own organic gardens.”

By starting out with certified-organic growing media, the central island of large containers can show off organic crops yet this growing season. The garden beds will start their three-year transition period with a cover-crop of field peas, a legume crop, to build soil and naturally fix nitrogen with the help of beneficial soil bacteria. Other elements include pollinator crops and a “Three Sisters” traditional complementary mix of corn, climbing beans and winter squash.

Vilsack has kept ultimate responsibility for the project in his office, giving the small space a big symbolic role in showing how organic agriculture can benefit the nation. Produce will be donated locally. Maintaining the garden will be USDA staff members who volunteer, backed up by the department’s commercial landscape maintenance firm.

This second federal garden gives organics a higher profile that seems to trouble some business and government officials who are not accustomed to sharing the official agricultural spotlight. “It’s time to shift the dollars we invest in agriculture from subsidizing commodities to incentivizing carbon-sequestering farming that includes using more cover crops, complex crop rotations and compost,” said LaSalle. “Organic agriculture is here to stay, and organic practices can work for any farmer or rancher who wants to invest in soil health and a systems approach to managing land, crops and livestock.”

ABOUT RODALE INSTITUTE

Rodale Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that creates global solutions from the ground up. Our soil scientists and a cooperating network of researchers have documented that organic farming techniques offer the best solution to global warming and famine. We were founded in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, in 1947 by organic pioneer J.I. Rodale. Our Farming Systems Trial®, the longest-running U.S. study comparing organic and conventional farming techniques, is the basis for our practical training of farmers in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

Our findings are clear: A global organic transformation will mitigate greenhouse gas emissions in our atmosphere and restore soil fertility. Our mission: We improve the health and well-being of people and the planet.

LINKS OF INTEREST

Rodale Institute papers:

Regenerative Organic Farming: A Solution to global warming

<http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/20080425/gw6>

Organic Green Revolution

By Tim LaSalle, PhD, Paul Hepperly, PhD, and Amadou Diop

<http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/20081203/fp1>

Rodale Institute compost story: Good compost made better

By Christine Ziegler Ulsh with Paul Hepperly, PhD.

<http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/20060413/ulshhepperly>

NOSB: www.ams.usda.gov/nosb

NOP: www.ams.usda.gov/nop

Photos, interview access available upon request.:

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