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PCB's

How Safe Is Sludge?

Q. I read with interest your article in the October issue, "Do You Know Where Your Sludge Is Tonight?"

At the present time I work in a sewage treatment plant in Liverpool, New York. I have used digested sludge mixed with sand and garden soil to germinate my tomato, eggplant, pepper and cabbage plants.

I have been warned not to use the sludge for fertilizer because of the passing of pathogenic organisms to the soil and produce. What assurance do I have that the pathogens have been destroyed by digestion?

I am holding off using the sludge for starting my plants until I can be sure the *bad* germs are destroyed and not passed on to the vegetables. Have tests been performed to prove that the pathogens are not present in the vegetables?

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A. Properly treated sewage sludge represents a valuable soil-building resource which can and should be recycled. Activated heat treatment essentially eliminates any danger from pathogens. "I know of no documented cases or case of sickness caused by eating foods fertilized by stabilized [processed] sludge," states Kenneth Dotson, soil scientist at the EPA's Municipal Environmental Research Laboratory in Cincinnati, Ohio.

While there are still unanswered questions, more research and investigation of methods for handling sludge and for making safe, practical use of it have been taking place at the experiment station, industrial and community levels. A new question arising is of the danger of PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) contamination of sludges. PCBs are very toxic and persistent chemicals that accumulate in the body tissues. A steady diet of only minute amounts of PCBs can cause serious health disorders. PCBs were widely used in the early 1970's but have since come under strict control. Monsanto no longer produces them, and General Electric has said they are stopping production as well. Those PCBs used today are limited to closed-circuit systems, with no PCBs being discharged. John Freshman of Senator Muskie's Environmental Pollution Subcommittee told us that the Clean Water Act of 1972, section 307A, is being amended to prevent discharges of substances that would make sludge unsafe for agriculture. The EPA is also formulating regulation for use of PCBs. Anyone wishing to use sludge can get a list of companies who have used PCBs from their regional EPA office, and the local sewage district should have test results on the sludge you are considering using. A new Rodale Press Book Sensible Sludge, *will be out in the spring and will detail recent tests, findings and other aspects of using sewage sludge.*

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