I love to make compost piles. Compost enriches the earth far better then anything else because of the microorganisms involved. By piling up layers of organic materials, manure and soil, we are essentially growing beneficial bacteria, fungi and protozoa. When spread onto the fields, these helpers form soil humus and make sure the plants are healthy.

With only an acre out of six planted, you would think I'd be plowing, sowing or hoeing. But instead I'm following my love. There is a huge demand for our produce, and we are regretfully turning away customers. So I am ignoring this year's garden and working on the 2009 crop. I'm making compost.

The spots where beef cattle are fed the big rolls of hay have it all. Our neighbors haven't cleaned up this place for several years and offered it to me. How could I refuse their refuse? One man's waste is another's treasure. Here was hay and manure just waiting to be piles.

A front-end loader is the tool of choice. I lay the bucket down so it is perfectly level and slowly inch forward. The manure-hay mixture comes loose at the soil line and rolls up. I back up and do it again. The trick is to not dip the bucket into the soil. A little soil is good to have in the piles, but it's easy to get too much.

Starting where they didn't feed this last winter yielded a big, black pile of ready to use compost. So I filled up Fil's truck and he and Luke spread it on the onions. A truckload mulched two long rows.

They came back for more, and the celery got dosed. Meanwhile, I'm reversing and forwarding for several hours, making mountains. I like the pile to be 10 to 12 feet wide at the base, six feet tall, and as long as need be. When I'm finished pile, I set the bucket on top and move it in and backward, making a concave impression on top.

Piles smaller than four foot high and six feet wide don't heat up as well. A bigger pile will not get enough air inside the middle and not rot well. Steep, sloping sides keep the cattle from climbing on it. The indention on top allows for rain to penetrate, and provides more access for the air, too. Earth, water, air and warmth get together with manure and hay and compost happens.

The boys return and get a load for the community garden downtown. It's black and beautiful.

Pete offers another spot, so we head over there. Soon more piles arise. One more load for the town garden and we call it a day.

I don’t know if it’ll make a hundred tons, but I’m sure it’s way over 50. Happiness persuades compost piles. A mess is cleaned up, and the future looks bright. Vegetables are easy to grow with lost of compost. But it takes several months for the compost to be ready for the soil. We’ll wait until it no longer smells or looks like manure and hay, but more like humus. I guess I’ll have to rent a dump truck this fall to move it all. Until then, it can decompose while we compose this year’s garden.