

Slim Buttes Gardening Project - September 2008

Project Scope: Make potting soil and compost for the spring of 2009 and evaluate the condition and viability of the current greenhouse.

The Running Strong Gardening Service is a wonderful partner and provider of gardening support and services to hundreds of families each year. The March and September 2008 potting soil projects have been undertaken to help and advance their good works.

Each year, probably the most critical part of the operation falls short because of a human or natural event overcoming a weak point in the operation. This results in some or all of the plant starts dying. The circumstances may vary, but the general cause is the lack of a proper greenhouse structure that is at their facility and under their control.

The current Running Strong operation is well run and provides a great service to the many families that wish to have a garden. The Potting Soil Project is to support and enhance their efforts. Focus is placed on a system of duplication, scheduling, local oversight and involvement.

Ongoing & Proposed Operational Outline

- ❖ **March 2008 – Make the potting soil for the spring starts and transplants.**
 - The biodynamic potting soil would give the starts a strong and healthy beginning and help them through the rigors of transplanting, greenhouse life and their main purpose, to thrive and produce for the many families who count on them. The making of the potting soil was successful. All of the plants were started and transplanted with this soil. As with many times before, the greenhouse was the weak point. Running Strong still started 250 gardens this year.

- ❖ **September 2008 – Make spring 2009 potting soil and compost and evaluate the greenhouse.**
 - The remaining bundles of donated coir and some amendments were brought to Slim Buttes in late August 2008. Local ingredients were collected for the piles. Horse and cow manure and hay are abundant within reasonable distances. Most of the rock powders are also within reach.
 - There are still enough of the Coir blocks for the 2010 potting soil.
 - Two volcano-shaped piles of potting soil were built from new coir, horse manure, cow manure, fresh-cut hay, leftover potting soil (from the frozen starts), rock powders, amendments and biodynamic teas. Each pile is approximately eight feet at the base, three feet on top and four and a half feet tall. These piles should yield around 150 to 200 cubic feet of finished potting soil. This should fill 675 to 750 trays of plant starts.
 - A smaller pile of the remaining manures, coir, hay, powders and teas were layered to form a manure compost pile. This compost pile should yield around 130 cubic feet of finished compost. This pile is a standard, layered, volcano-shaped compost pile. A hay/manure, cupcake-style compost pile construction was discussed and planned.
 - The current greenhouse at the Timber Frame was measured, evaluated and discussed. The requirements were listed and viewed with this structure's current condition. There is really only a wooden structure that is 23.5 feet wide by 31.5 feet long, with a dirt floor and no interior improvements. This greenhouse would be used best as a shaded plant area with a gravel floor, for

starting fall plants. A new blizzard-proof greenhouse is needed for starting spring plants. Heating, cooling, and venting need to be on automatic controls, to help minimize the human factors.

- ❖ October 2008 – Finalize greenhouse requirements, source greenhouses and funding.
 - Installing the greenhouse this fall would really help solve most of the past problems.
 - The weather up to the end of November is workable. February is too cold and wet and March is too late.
 - With the potting soil ready and the greenhouse functional, the planting season can start on time next year. This means starting the regular cool weather plants earlier than in past years and being able to add lettuce and greens.
 - With the greenhouse ready, the planting schedule is spread out over a three and a half month period. This better fits the growing conditions for cool and warm weather crops. The cool weather crops and a few tomatoes could be available for planting before the last frost. These plants will leave the greenhouse when the main crop of plants needs this greenhouse space.

An on-schedule, intact and more diverse planting in the spring is very realistic.

- ❖ Summary
 - A successful gardening season starts the year before. This is what we are putting into motion. The three main things to accomplish before planting season starts are:
 - Make potting soil – this takes the longest, so it was the first item done.
 - Build new greenhouse – this takes a short time to complete and is very important to add length to the growing season. This year the tomatoes weren't ready until the end of August and it frosts by the end of September. This one month of ripe tomatoes can be extended to three months.
 - Finalize the planting and distribution schedule by early 2009. This allows for starting, transplanting and distributing the plants at the correct times. Organizing seed, making a seed list, and planning start dates allows for better labor coordination throughout the whole process. This schedule would also help the gardeners know what types of plants will be available next year and when they will need to be planted into the garden. A simple mailing could go out in March.
- ❖ Some possible changes and additions to the current operation:
 - Start preparing the garden plots earlier
 - Make as many hay/manure compost piles as possible. Start them this summer 2009, for the spring of 2010. Use no fly-attracting ingredients and turn by a tractor to minimize people and rattlesnake get together.
 - Make and install a flow form fountain/biodynamic tea mixing tank, to make the teas for the potting soil and compost piles.
 - Cover the wooden greenhouse frame with a shade cloth and put three inches of gravel down. This area could then be used to start cool weather plants in August. With a thick enough gravel floor, a simple misting system could help cool the plants on the hot and dry days of summer.
 - Erect garden fencing to protect the plants after all this work. Neighbors let their animals graze loose. A fence would also help keep the native critters from being too destructive.
 - Find a source of old hay for garden mulch. Last year's hay would be aged, which would decrease the weed seeds, hold moisture better than fresh hay and add to the soil sooner.

