Compost Inoculants and Soil Microbes
A Business Perspective

Pearls From The Pile Series
Making Money With Microbes

Symbio.co.uk
(Surrey, UK)

A Biotech Company with a Backbone - That's one way to describe my most recent interviewee. Meet Symbio, a UK-based environmental biotechnology company specializing in the manufacture and sale of microbial products, most importantly, compost inoculants. Unlike so many other companies in this arena, Symbio prides itself on a line of products that are based on extensive practical field and lab-based research. As you can tell, "this ain't no ordinary biotech company we're talking about here!"

My interview consisted of six questions, each with the intention of providing you with greater insight into the ins and outs of microbial inoculants, specifically compost inoculants and those for compost tea. I hope you enjoy.

Q1. Please tell us about Symbio and provide some general information about your biotech business.

A. We are an environmental biotechnology business founded in 1990 and are based in Surrey, UK. We specialize in the manufacture and sale of specialized microbial products and biostimulants to help create naturally healthy and productive soils for all types of growing. We do not do large scale composting but manufacture specialist microbial inoculants to speed up the composting process and improve the quality of the final product. We also supply the highest quality fungal-dominant compost packs for compost tea making, together with a full range of brewing equipment and complementary additional microbial inoculants, biostimulants and organic nutrients.
Q2. There is a lot of interest around compost tea right now, can you discuss some of the benefits of applying compost tea in food production systems?

A. The typical reports we receive from growers who use compost teas – typically in conjunction with additional natural soil humus derivatives such as humic and fulvic acids and chitinase, together with low salt or organic feeds, and mycorrhizal fungal inoculants – are improved crop production, improved flavor, healthier plants which suffer from less disease and a soil which retains and recycles nutrients more efficiently requiring less fertilization.

CompostJunkie members get 10% off all Symbio products

Email me for discount code

Q3. How important is it that the average home gardener, who uses compost tea, also own a microscope for analyzing their brews?

A. If you are comfortable that the source of compost you are using is of high quality, that your brewing process is sound and that your equipment is kept clean and sterile between brews then for the home user a microscope is more of a luxury than a necessity. However, the diversity of life you can see in a brew and a treated soil is astonishing and very compelling and the most casual of microscope users can very quickly get hooked on tea and soil viewing.
Q4. For the compost tea side of your business, who is your ideal customer? Why?

A. Our ideal customer is anyone who is interested in working with naturally, healthy soil, and providing the life in the soil that plants have evolved to rely on. Our customers also appreciate that the intensive management and regular disturbance of soils, together with heavy inorganic fertilizer and pesticide use creates a biologically ‘young’ soil, bacterial dominant and which is biologically most suited to the growth of the primary colonizing plants.

The majority of the plants we try to grow require a more mature biologically diverse and fungal dominant soil. This essential biology can be put back into the soil through the use of well made composts or compost teas and maintained with the appropriate nutrition. To this end, we supply products for the lightly tended garden up to the most intensively managed sports surfaces and productive horticultural soils.

Q5. I notice Symbio sells a compost starter product; from what I understand, the typical compost pile has thousands of different microbial species present that are all working together to breakdown the ingredients. Can we really improve upon Nature by adding in a couple "hand-picked" microbes? Please discuss some of your results with your compost product in particular.

A. The use of compost inoculants is usually used to fine tune the composting process, typically for more niche commercial operations – this can involve the acceleration of the composting process for practical reasons. For instance, the addition of significant populations of lignin degrading fungi can more rapidly process woody material to quickly produce a high quality humus (i.e. rich compost). Essentially, we can tailor the microbes to produce a more bacterial dominant compost more suited to the growth of annual plants or a more fungal dominant compost for perennial plants.
More significant are inoculants that can be added on planting in addition to compost such as mycorrhizal fungi. These are usually only found as the occasional spore in composts because viable mycorrhizae mycelia only survive when associated with a living plant and are quickly lost through soil disturbance (hence their absence in compost). However, they can be added directly to the plant root to ensure the rapid establishment of this vital plant-fungus symbiosis.

Q6. What makes Symbio's products and technologies unique?

A. I don’t know that our products are unique but I would say that over 20 years in this line of work and developing technologies through practical application in the field as well as lab–based research has given us an unrivaled expertise. This is then transferred into the development, manufacture and application of cost-effective biological inoculants, biostimulants, and fertilizers; each of which maximize the biological health of your soil and thereby produce a plant of optimum health and vigor. As you know, when a plant is healthy it is naturally more resistant to environmental stresses and strains and requires minimal inputs and effort to maintain it.
I don't know about you guys, but I feel like I just had a university-level course in biology. That was a lot of information tucked into a small amount of space, wasn't it? If your brain feels a little sore, then please go get some fresh air and give it another read through.

Personally, I enjoyed the entire interview but a couple responses really jumped out at me. For instance, I was reminded why I don't till my garden - tillage disturbs the soil which encourages the growth of bacteria; however, I'm on the hunt for fungi and that just doesn't happen with frequent tilling.

As I conclude, I would like to thank Dan and the rest of the staff at Symbio for making this interview possible. If you would like to experiment with Symbio's compost inoculants they're willing to give all CompostJunkie members a 10% discount. This discount actually applies to ALL of their products, not just their compost inoculants. Please contact me for the discount code.

If you would like to learn more about various microbial inoculants and biostimulants, please contact Symbio directly.

I hope you found this interview enjoyable and learned a little bit about compost inoculants. If you missed it, here is my recent interview with Peter, from Compostwerks.com, sharing his wisdom on compost teas.

Until next time...

Peace, Love, and Happy Composting!