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CELEBRATING **35** YEARS

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The 20th Annual Listing of Top Ranked Businesses

THE TOP

500



NORTH BAY COMPANIES

UpFront

- 8** Letters
- 8** Classic Peanuts *Charles M. Schulz*
- 11** Publisher's Forum *Norman Rosinski*
Creativity and Courage
- 13** By the Numbers
- 15** QuickTakes

SpecialFeatures

- 17** Green Scene *Patricia Dines*
A Deeper Shade of Green
- 18** The North Bay's Top 500 Businesses
The Top 500 Businesses of 2009, Ranked by Revenue
- 20** Top 500 Company Profiles
Profiles of a Selection of Top 500 Ranked Companies

Columns

- 23** Wealth Wise *David Raub*
The Lost Decade
- 37** Only in Marin *Bill Meagher*
Banks, Bankruptcy and Corbet's
- 45** Tech Talk *Michael E. Duffy*
Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger
- 73** Simply Legal *Brandon R. Blevans, Esq.*
Nothing but Work
- 79** Vine Wise *Richard L. Thomas*
Don't Judge a Bottle by Its Label
- 97** How Business Smart Are You? *Shawn Jackson*
Can You Help Manny?

BackoftheBook

- 89** Top 500 Alphabetical Index
- 95** Bulletin Board
- 96** Biz Directory
- 98** Beyond the Boardroom *Alexandra Russell*
Marcus Benedetti, president of Clover/Stornetta

Accurate Forklift Inc.	78
Agilent Technologies	24
Alvarado St. Bakery, Semper Virens Foods Coop.	34
Anderson Zeigler Disharoon Gallagher & Gray	70
Annie's Inc.	26
Architectural Plastics Inc.	84
B.R. Cohn Winery Inc.	74
Bank of Marin	30
Bay-Tec Engineering Co.	44
Bayshore International	28
Berry's Sawmill	84
Beyers Costin	84
BioMarin Pharmaceutical Inc.	24
Boden Construction Inc.	76
Bradley Real Estate	48
BRS Group	84
Burr Pilger Mayer	30
Caletti Jungsten	50
California Audio and Video	78
California Wine Tours, Inc.	44
Calix Networks	24
Capital Lumber Co.	31
Cassidy Turley BT Commercial	68
Central Valley Builders Supply	32
Circle Bank	40
Codding Enterprises	39
Coldwell Banker Brokers of the Valley	49
Connections IT	35
Costello & Sons Insurance Brokers	74
Creative Property Services	49
Demptos Napa Cooperage	49
Deposition Sciences Inc.	39
Discovery Office Systems	42
Dry Creek Vineyard	46
E & M Electric & Machinery Inc.	35
Eddinger Enterprises, Inc.	70
Embassy Suites Hotel San Rafael	50
Empire College	74
F. Korbel & Bros. Inc.	24
Ferrari-Carano Winery	35
Fireman's Fund Insurance Co.	20
Fishman Supply Co.	49
Foster's Wine Estates Americas	20
Fountaingrove Golf & Athletic Club	76
FRG Waste Resources, Inc.	70
G & C Autobody	39
Gaw Van Male	72
Geary, Shea, O'Donnell, Grattan and Mitchell, P.C.	80
Ghilotti Brothers Inc.	26
Granite Construction Co.	31
Grgich Hills Estate	50
Healdsburg Lumber Company, Inc.	39
Hennessy Advisors, Inc.	76
Hess Collection Winery	31
Hilton Sonoma Wine Country	49
Hyatt Vineyard Creek Hotel and Spa	72
ICON Design and Display	48
IDEX Health & Science LLC	31
IMSI/Design, LLC	74
Infineon Raceway	32
InnerWorkings	21
Innovative Molding Co.	35
Iron Horse Ranch & Vineyards	82
Joe Lunardi Electric Co.	44
Jordan Vineyard & Winery	33
Kaiser Permanente Sonoma/Marin	20
Keegan & Coppin Co., Inc. - ONCOR International	--
Kreuzberger I Associates	--



A Deeper Shade of Green

By Patricia Dines

For some businesses, green is just the latest trend—something new to add to their existing product lines, marketing and operations. But for a few pioneering companies, eco-principles have long been at the core of what they do, woven into their organizations' fundamental design and ongoing success.

It's in this latter group we find Petaluma's Sonoma Compost Company (SCC), which has spent the last 25 years transforming local yard trimmings and agricultural discards into rich composts and mulches that nurture local farms, school and home gardens, parks, lawns and more.

Each year, SCC diverts more waste from the landfill than any other Sonoma County recycling service, and it's made use of an incredible 1.2 million tons of discarded material since 1993. Through this work, the company vitally contributes to Sonoma County's diversion mandates and helps reduce the financial and ecological impacts of hauling garbage to out-of-county landfills.

Patrick Carter, waste management specialist at the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency (SCWMA), says, "Sonoma County would have a lot of difficulty meeting its waste reduction goals if this program wasn't in place."

Green journey

The seed for SCC was planted in the 1980s, when co-owner Alan Siegle was teaching Sonoma State University's Ecological Food Production class and co-owner Will Bakx was managing its student farm. When Siegle had difficulty finding organic compost suitable for his organic Bennett Valley Farm, he and Bakx decided to create a company to fill this need. In 1985, Santa Rosa's Bennett Valley Farm Compost was born, turning unwanted local horse and turkey manure into a resource to naturally feed local soils.

In 1989, California passed AB939, also known as the Integrated Waste Management Act. This legislation sought to address the state's increasing waste and decreasing landfill space by mandating specific targets for diverting usable materials from our garbage. The law's first reduction priority was organic (carbon-based) materials, and so, in 1993, SCC launched its current yard debris composting program at Sonoma County's Central Disposal Site, which it operates in collaboration with the County of Sonoma and the SCWMA.

Daily operations

Each year, SCC processes more than 93,000 tons of yard trimmings, agricultural discards, wood debris and vegetative food scraps. The materials first arrive via curbside green cans, individual drop-offs, and local farms, wineries and food processors. SCC then removes contaminants (such as plastic and glass) and recovers reusable wood items (such as pallets, lumber and firewood, which it sells at discounted prices).

The remaining clean organic matter is ground up and placed in 42 windrows (long piles) stretching 7 feet tall, 18 feet wide, and from 180 to 650 feet long. Using specialized heavy equipment, these windrows are turned, monitored and irrigated as needed during their 70- to 100-day processing periods.

SCC's harvest for its efforts is 84,000 cubic yards of quality soil amendments per year. This includes its Sonoma Compost, Organic Hi-Test Compost (with chicken feathers for higher nitrogen), Mallard Plus Compost (with rice hulls for lightness), Feather-Lite Amended Soil (with sandy loam added to the Mallard), two mulches and custom blends.

Bakx explains that most soils are poor in organic matter, so adding compost can increase plant productivity and vitality by improving soil structure, providing nutrients, conserving water, reducing erosion and increasing microbial activity. Also, all of SCC's soil amendments (except its Path Mulch) meet organic farming standards, which help local farmers serve the growing organic market while reducing synthetic fertilizer and pesticide use.

Community success

Siegle notes that SCC's ecological benefits extend beyond converting discards into useful eco-products. For instance, processing materials locally avoids the environmental impacts of other recycling operations "that use vast amounts of energy to ship recycled materials all around the world to be made into products that are shipped back to us." Additionally, the operation reduces the greenhouse gases (such as methane) produced by organic materials decaying in landfills.

SCC also cuts costs for garbage ratepayers and self-haul businesses, because the fee for discarding yard waste at the landfill site is a third of that for depositing garbage. Plus, comments Siegle, "We're a great example of how a green business can create much-needed jobs in a community." Yard trimmings in the landfill created virtually no jobs, he elaborates, "but now, more than 20 employees are working full-time here to support a green enterprise."

What's next?

In 2007, a SCWMA study gave SCC good news: From 1990 to 2007, yard waste in local garbage had been cut 73 percent, and was now just 6 percent of total waste. The report also highlighted the next area SCC seeks to address: the 80,000 tons of food we throw away each year, which is 21 percent of total waste. By finding ways to retrieve this material, Bakx and Siegle hope they'll get closer to their ultimate goal—recovering all compostable materials from our waste stream, thus helping move our culture toward a new reality of zero waste and full use of our valuable resources.

Patricia Dines has been a freelance writer on sustainability topics for 26 years. For more about her work, see www.patriciadines.info. For more about Sonoma Compost, visit www.sonomacompost.com or call (707) 578-5459.

