

Local growers to put 'manure tea' to the test

■ The concoction is thought to make plants more healthy and productive. Growers in the Wichita area hope to provide proof.

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What do you get when you take water, manure, molasses and baker's yeast and aerate it to a foaming froth?

A tea that's healthy, perhaps even tasty-looking, but nothing you'd ever dream of drinking.

Manure tea is a time-honored way of adding microbes to the roots of growing plants to make them healthier and more productive.

Local supporters of Trees for Life are hoping that testing the strange brew locally — first anecdotally and then scientifically — will give it credence that may help tsunami-ravaged islands build their way back to sustenance.

An agronomist from California with a big heart for helping the poor flew to Wichita recently to help Balbir Mathur, president of Trees for Life, set up cauldrons of the stuff at a local farm, a couple of garden centers and Trees for Life.

"What he wants to do is document scientifically the amount of improvement so people will want to use it," said the agronomist, Jim Barlow, of Morgan Hill, Calif.

He's worked in sustainable agriculture for 30 years and has made commercial microbial products.

While such products have become more common in garden



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Agronomist Jim Barlow, left, talks about brewing manure tea with Balbir Mathur, president of Trees for Life.

stores, the benefit of manure tea is its low cost. "The poorest of the poor" could afford it, Barlow said, estimating the cost at \$1 an acre.

While Mathur still is looking for someone to do the scientific testing of manure tea, he has secured local growers to try it, and he has thrown the invitation out to anyone to join in.

Half of the corn, tomatoes and other crops at Grandma's Farm on North Tyler Road will be watered from a 500-gallon tank of the manure tea, and half won't be. The production of each will be compared at harvest time. Tree Top Nursery and Johnson's Garden Centers will also use it on some of their ornamental plantings for similar comparisons.

If their anecdotal evidence is encouraging — and Mathur expects it to be, because he had "fantastic" results trying it 15 years ago in India — he'll recommend the

practice to scientists on India's Andaman and Nicobar islands.

Mathur visited them recently to see what Trees for Life could do to help residents rebuild their lives in the long term. Trees for Life is a nonprofit organization that plants fruit trees in developing countries to help make them self-sustaining.

Islanders saw their rice paddies and land planted in fruits and vegetables inundated with salty seawater from last December's tsunami, Barlow said.

"They're economically devastated," Barlow said. "So here can be a fairly powerful help."

The ingredients in manure tea provide microbes, vitamins and enzymes to the roots of plants. The result should be healthier, more productive plants, but as far as Barlow knows, those benefits have never been scientifically proved. The lack of a standardized source of manure is one obvious stumbling block.

"As it is now, it's kind of an old wives' tale or nonconventional thing that some organic farmers are doing," Barlow said.

The tea is applied at a rate of 10 to 20 gallons per acre, at planting time at the very least, but also twice more during the early growing process, if the grower can afford it.

But the tea can't be the only answer for crops and gardens. It does not take the place of fertilizers, for example.

"This is not a source of nitrogen, potassium, phosphorous; there's not enough in it," Barlow said. "It's not a chemical, not a pesticide. It's in a different category. It can take the yield to the next level."

