



smell from the compost heap permeates the office, and the workers keep a cardboard box filled with different bottles of perfumes by the door. One of them, a peach bottle labelled with only a picture of an Indian in full headdress, lies amongst the English Leather Aftershave, Undeniable For Men, and Hawk by Mennen. I take a spray from Indian-in-a-headress, which smells thick and musty, and head out the door.

Around the side of the office is the entrance to the compost shed. Feeling quite confident with my Indian-in-a-headress perfume, I walk inside. The blast of sour vomit is overpowering, causing my nose to crinkle and eyes to water.

From here I can see the piles are literally steaming. They're also crawling with what must be thousands of flies.

This gives a whole new meaning to the word "recycling."

This compost does get put back into campus once springtime roles around, helping to nourish the flowers we see, ever so briefly in late April, back to health. But according to Charlie Ziemer, a utility worker at the compost facility, the process to turn out good, usable fertilizer takes two years.

Each day a truck delivers two dumpsters filled with food from the three dining

halls on campus. The dumpsters are four yards long, about the size of a small tank on wheels. After they drop off their payloads, the workers let the garbage sit in the shed for about a year until its consistency is "like mashed potatoes," said Ziemer. "Not too dry, not too wet."

The men add wood chips, paper shavings, dried leaves, hay, straw or anything that's carbon based to the piles to speed up decomposition. The breakdown of carbon adds heat, says Ziemer, and the piles can reach up to 150 degrees in the summer.

After the compost decomposes for roughly a year, it's run through a "screener," a metal-screened sphere roughly two yards in diameter. The screener spins the compost, separating the woodchips, paper and stray forks from the usable fertilizer, which is then taken outside and left for an additional year.

As the new heap, now about the size of two elephants, swelters and freezes through the seasons, it streams a dark trail of murky sludge down into the "tea pond." Workers say ducks and other birds often swim and drink from the garbage run-off, but that the brown water can't hurt them.

When the leftover food has sat in the sun for another 12 months, it gets broken

down into its final stage — a black soot that resembles thousands of tiny wood shavings. "Now," says Ziemer, digging a hand into the pile and bringing the scoop up to his nose. "It only smells like dirt."

Because IC's brand of fertilizer is so rich in salt from the dining halls, it needs to be specially mixed so it won't harm the plants it's supposed to help grow. "But when it is mixed correctly," says Ziemer, "the plants shoot up like they've been placed next to a nuclear power plant."

Though the fertilizer is locally renowned for its strength, if this symbol isn't a call to conserve, I don't know what is. Two years to decompose and get rid of that smell — a smell not just of rotting garbage or of decomposition or of flies covered in dirt, but of waste, pure and simple.

Zachary Dinerstein is a super-senior Planned Studies major who follows his nose wherever it goes. Email him at zdiners1@ithaca.edu.