

Microbial Communities: Key to Composting Optimization

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Received: 01-Jul-2025, Manuscript No. jbrbd-25; **Editor assigned:** 03-Jul-2025, PreQC No. jbrbd-25(PQ); **Reviewed:** 17-Jul-2025, QC No. jbrbd-25; **Revised:** 22-Jul-2025, Manuscript No. jbrbd-25(R); **Published:** 29-Jul-2025, **DOI:** 10.4172/2155-6199.1000692

Citation: Ribeiro DJ (2025) Microbial Communities: Key to Composting Optimization. J Bioremediat Biodegrad 16: 692.

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Abstract

This compilation of research explores various facets of composting as a waste management strategy. It covers microbial dynamics in aerobic composting, bioaugmentation for food waste, vermicomposting of agricultural residues, and integrated anaerobic digestion with composting for municipal solid waste. The impact of bulking agents, the role of biochar in managing mixed waste, and composting as a bioremediation technique for contaminated soils are discussed. Furthermore, the studies address greenhouse gas emissions from green waste composting and improvements in sewage sludge composting. Comparative analyses of different composting methods, such as windrow versus static pile, are also presented, emphasizing the influence on microbial activity and compost quality.

Keywords

Aerobic Composting; Microbial Communities; Bioaugmentation; Vermicomposting; Anaerobic Digestion; Bulking Agents; Biochar; Bioremediation; Greenhouse Gas Emissions; Activated Carbon

Introduction

The intricate world of microbial communities plays a pivotal role in the aerobic composting of organic waste, with specific bacterial and fungal phyla being essential for the decomposition process. Factors such as temperature, pH, and aeration profoundly influence microbial diversity and enzyme activity, directly impacting the quality of the final compost product. Optimizing these composting conditions holds significant potential for enhancing nutrient cycling and reducing greenhouse gas emissions during waste management [1].

Accelerating the composting of food waste can be effectively achieved through bioaugmentation with specific microbial consortia. The introduction of well-defined microbial mixes has been

shown to substantially reduce composting time and improve compost maturity, as indicated by lower C/N ratios and increased humic substance content. This bioaugmentation strategy presents a promising approach for increasing the efficiency of industrial-scale composting operations [2].

Vermicomposting, a process that leverages earthworms for the decomposition of organic waste, offers a sustainable method for treating agricultural residues. This technique leads to vermicompost with improved nutrient content, reduced pathogen loads, and enhanced physical properties compared to traditionally composted materials. The integration of vermicomposting into agricultural systems yields considerable ecological and economic benefits [3].

An integrated approach combining anaerobic digestion and composting provides an effective strategy for managing municipal solid waste. In this two-stage process, anaerobic digestion initially extracts biogas, after which the digestate undergoes composting. This integrated system maximizes resource recovery, producing both renewable energy and high-quality compost, while sub-

stantially decreasing the volume of waste sent to landfills [4].

The selection of appropriate bulking agents is critical for the successful composting of materials like pig manure. Different bulking agents, such as sawdust and straw, influence aeration, moisture content, and the C/N ratio, thereby affecting degradation rates and the quality of the resulting compost. Practical insights into optimizing bulking agent selection are crucial for effective pig manure composting [5].

A novel composting technology incorporating biochar has been developed for managing plastic waste. Biochar enhances the adsorption of volatile organic compounds, improves aeration, and can potentially immobilize heavy metals during the composting of mixed organic and plastic waste. This method suggests a pathway for the simultaneous management of both biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste streams [6].

Composting has emerged as a viable ex-situ bioremediation technique for soils contaminated with polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). The process, especially when enhanced with amendments like wood chips, significantly reduces PAH concentrations through microbial degradation and volatilization. This highlights composting's effectiveness in treating contaminated soils [7].

Quantitative assessment of greenhouse gas emissions, including CO₂, CH₄, and N₂O, from green waste composting is essential for developing sustainable practices. Factors like aeration rate, moisture content, and temperature influence these emissions, and strategies such as optimizing C/N ratios and using porous bulking agents can mitigate them, contributing to low-emission composting [8].

Forced aeration composting of sewage sludge, particularly with the addition of activated carbon, offers significant advantages. This method effectively reduces odor emissions and improves dewatering characteristics of the sludge while enhancing the quality of the final compost. Activated carbon acts as an adsorbent for volatile compounds and may support microbial activity [9].

A comparative study of different composting methods, specifically windrow versus static pile, reveals distinct impacts on microbial community structure and enzyme activities during food waste degradation. Forced aeration in static piles promotes a more diverse and active microbial community, leading to faster degradation and superior compost quality compared to traditional windrow composting [10].

Description

The microbial communities within aerobic composting systems are fundamental to the breakdown of organic waste, with particular emphasis placed on the roles of specific bacterial and fungal phyla in this decomposition pathway. The environmental parameters of temperature, pH, and aeration are recognized as critical influencers of microbial diversity and the activity of key enzymes, all of which collectively determine the quality of the final compost product. Furthermore, the research in this area explores avenues for optimizing composting conditions to foster enhanced nutrient cycling and to curtail greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to more sustainable waste management practices [1].

To expedite the composting process for food waste, bioaugmentation utilizing specific microbial consortia has been investigated for its efficacy. Studies have demonstrated that the deliberate introduction of carefully selected microbial mixes can lead to a significant reduction in the overall composting time. This approach also results in compost of higher maturity, which is evidenced by a decrease in the carbon-to-nitrogen (C/N) ratio and an increase in the concentration of humic substances. Consequently, bioaugmentation stands out as a promising strategy for boosting the efficiency of industrial composting facilities [2].

Vermicomposting presents a sustainable method for the management and treatment of agricultural residues, employing earthworms to facilitate the decomposition of organic waste. The resulting vermicompost exhibits superior nutrient content, a reduced presence of pathogens, and improved physical characteristics when contrasted with compost produced through conventional methods. This technique also offers substantial ecological advantages and demonstrates economic viability for integration into sustainable agricultural systems [3].

An integrated approach involving both anaerobic digestion and composting has been developed as a comprehensive strategy for managing municipal solid waste. This method involves a sequential two-stage process where anaerobic digestion is employed first to extract biogas, followed by the composting of the remaining digestate. Such an integrated system maximizes the recovery of valuable resources, yielding both renewable energy and high-quality compost, while concurrently achieving a significant reduction in the burden on landfills [4].

The composting process for materials such as pig manure is significantly influenced by the choice of bulking agents. Different bulking agents, including common materials like sawdust and straw, play a crucial role in regulating key physical and chemical

parameters such as aeration, moisture content, and the C/N ratio. These factors, in turn, directly impact the rates of organic matter degradation and the ultimate quality of the finished compost, underscoring the importance of informed bulking agent selection for effective composting [5].

A novel composting technology has been proposed for the management of plastic waste, distinguished by the integration of biochar as a core component. The inclusion of biochar in the composting matrix is shown to enhance the adsorption of volatile organic compounds, improve the overall aeration of the mixture, and potentially aid in the immobilization of heavy metals during the composting of combined organic and plastic waste. These findings point towards a feasible strategy for the simultaneous treatment of waste streams that include both biodegradable and non-biodegradable components [6].

Composting has been identified as a practical and effective ex-situ bioremediation technique for soils contaminated with polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). Research indicates that composting processes, particularly when augmented with amendments such as wood chips, can lead to a substantial reduction in PAH concentrations. This reduction is primarily achieved through microbial degradation pathways and volatilization, establishing composting as a viable solution for remediating PAH-polluted soils [7].

A critical aspect of sustainable waste management involves the quantitative assessment of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, including carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), and nitrous oxide (N₂O), generated during the composting of green waste. Factors such as aeration rate, moisture content, and temperature are known to influence these emissions. Strategies aimed at mitigation, such as optimizing C/N ratios and incorporating porous bulking agents, are being developed to promote low-emission composting practices [8].

The composting of sewage sludge can be significantly improved through the application of forced aeration systems coupled with the addition of activated carbon. This combined approach has demonstrated substantial effectiveness in reducing odor emissions and enhancing the dewatering properties of the sludge. Moreover, it contributes to an improved quality of the final compost product, with activated carbon serving a dual role as an adsorbent for volatile compounds and a potential enhancer of microbial activity [9].

A comparative analysis between windrow and static pile composting methods for food waste has been conducted, focusing on their respective impacts on microbial community structure and enzyme activities. The findings indicate that static piles utilizing

forced aeration foster a more diverse and metabolically active microbial community. This enhanced microbial environment results in accelerated degradation rates and a higher quality compost product when compared to conventional windrow composting techniques [10].

Conclusion

Research highlights the critical role of microbial communities in aerobic composting, with factors like temperature, pH, and aeration influencing compost quality. Bioaugmentation with microbial consortia accelerates food waste composting, while vermicomposting offers a sustainable treatment for agricultural residues. Integrated anaerobic digestion and composting maximizes resource recovery from municipal solid waste. The selection of bulking agents and the use of biochar are crucial for optimizing composting of specific wastes like pig manure and mixed organic/plastic waste, respectively. Composting serves as an effective bioremediation technique for PAH-contaminated soils. Mitigating greenhouse gas emissions from green waste composting is achieved through process optimization. Forced aeration and activated carbon improve sewage sludge composting by reducing odor and enhancing compost quality. Static pile composting with forced aeration is more effective for food waste than windrow composting due to enhanced microbial activity.

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