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MAY/JUNE 2004

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Diaper Development

If Belgian botanist Willem van Cotthem is right, an infant's diaper holds the solution to world hunger. By adapting the technology that keeps a baby's bottom dry, van Cotthem has developed a soil conditioner that could bring agricultural productivity to barren regions of the world.

The soil conditioner mix, dubbed "TerraCottem" (TC), includes water-absorbent polymers and mineral fertilizers. Just as super absorbents in

diapers



Infant industry: TerraCottem in the raw

prevent liquid from escaping, the chemicals in TC help soil retain water. According to van Cotthem, the mix boosts crop yields by 25 to 100 percent while cutting water use in half (depending on the crop and terrain).

TC holds most promise for large swaths of desiccated land. Successful tests in Senegal, Niger, Pakistan, and China made van Cotthem confident the technology can improve crop yields and reduce the impact of drought in developing nations. Dharamvir Singh, who heads a rural development organization in India, reports excellent results growing tomatoes with TC. Yet, at around \$5 per pound in Bombay, the soil conditioner is beyond the means of most farmers. (The 660 pounds of TC required to treat five acres of land costs a prohibitive \$3,300.) However, landscape gardeners and golf course managers in wealthy countries such as Australia, Britain, and Spain have snapped up the product.

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Bank have not yet shown interest. Jos Buys, an official with the Belgian mission to the United Nations, observed TC's effectiveness firsthand in Burkina Faso and is puzzled by the tepid response. Van Cotthem is also frus-



The grass is greener: The effects of TerraCottem on a barren landscape in Arbolle, Burkina Faso, in 1988, 1990, and 1992 (from top to bottom)

trated by the reaction of major development organizations. "They are investing in very expensive dams, irrigation canals, and pumps, which can still only deliver water locally. With TerraCottem, you can go anywhere and use the little water that is available, which sometimes falls from the sky for free."