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By-Products of Black Soldier Fly Composting and Their Diverse Applications

*Mandala Manisha
Department of Entomology, Lovely Professional University (Phagwara), Jalandhar-144411, Punjab, India
*Corresponding Author's email: manishamandala16@gmail.com

The Black Soldier Fly (BSF), *Hermetia illucens L* (Diptera: Stratiomyidae), has drawn significant scientific and industrial interest over the past decade as a highly efficient bioconversion organism. When organic wastes ranging from food scraps to agricultural residues pass through BSF larvae, the resulting by-products are far more than simple waste derivatives. Larval frass, insect biomass, lipid fractions, chitin-rich exoskeletons, and pupal exuviae each carry distinct biochemical profiles that translate into measurable agronomic, nutritional, and industrial value. This article synthesises current knowledge on the composition and applied uses of these by-products, with emphasis on their role within circular bio-economy frameworks. The evidence reviewed demonstrates that BSF-based composting systems can simultaneously address organic waste management, soil fertility restoration, animal feed security, and the search for sustainable bio-based materials outcomes that conventional composting approaches rarely achieve together. Key research gaps, scalability constraints, and regulatory considerations are also discussed to guide future investigations.

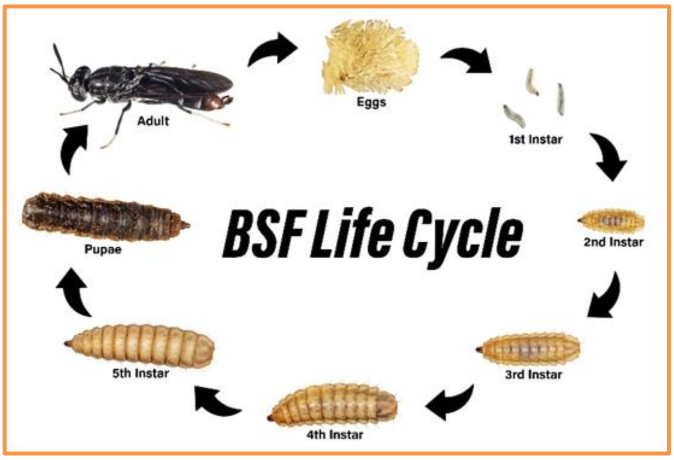
Keywords: *Hermetia illucens*, insect frass, larval composting, chitin, circular bioeconomy, organic waste valorisation

Introduction

Black Soldier Fly (BSF), *Hermetia illucens* L., is a cosmopolitan dipteran insect whose larvae possess an exceptional capacity to consume and biotransform organic materials at rates that far exceed those of conventional composting microorganisms . A single kilogram of BSF eggs can, within 14–18 days, reduce several hundred kilograms of organic waste while yielding a suite of recoverable by-products whose economic and ecological significance is now increasingly recognised. Unlike traditional vermicomposting or thermophilic composting which yield largely a single output (compost or humus) BSF-based bioconversion simultaneously generates larval biomass rich in protein and fat, a frass that functions as a slow-release fertiliser, insect-derived chitin of pharmaceutical and agricultural grade, and residual oils suitable for biofuel production .

The mounting global pressures of food waste, soil degradation, antibiotic-resistant pathogens in livestock, and dependence on synthetic inputs have collectively elevated BSF bioconversion from a curiosity to a pragmatic solution. In India, where an estimated 68.7 million tonnes of food waste are generated annually and soil organic matter in agricultural lands continues to decline, BSF systems offer a locally adaptable, low-energy intervention that closes nutrient loops at the farm or community scale . This review organises the current body of evidence around five major BSF by-product streams frass, larval biomass, lipids, chitin, and exuviae and describes their scientifically validated applications across agriculture, animal nutrition, materials science, and environmental management.

Life Cycle of Black Soldier Fly



The life cycle of Hermetia illucens consists of five major stages: egg, larva, prepupa, pupa, and adult. Female flies deposit eggs near decomposing organic matter, and the eggs hatch within 3–4 days under favourable environmental conditions. The larval stage is the most biologically active phase, during which larvae consume large quantities of organic waste and convert it into nutrient-rich biomass and frass. After approximately 14–18 days of feeding, the larvae enter the prepupal stage, followed by pupation. Adult flies emerge after completion of metamorphosis and primarily focus on reproduction rather than feeding. The larval stage is considered the most important stage in BSF composting systems because it is directly responsible for waste reduction and by-product generation.

By-Products Generated During BSF Composting

When BSF larvae process organic substrates, they do not simply decompose material; they structurally transform it. The process generates distinct recoverable fractions at different stages of the insect life cycle. Table 1 summarises the major by-product streams, their common synonyms, and primary application domains.

Table 1. Major by-products of BSF bioconversion composting and their primary applications

By-product	Also Known As	Primary Applications
Larval frass	Black soldier fly frass (BSFF)	Organic fertilizer, soil amendment, biopesticide
Prepupae/Pupae	Dried larval biomass	Poultry, fish & pig feed; biodiesel feedstock
Larval fat	Insect-derived lipids / BSF oil	Biodiesel, cosmetics, antimicrobial agents
Larval protein	Insect meal / chitin-rich protein	Aquafeed, pet food, human nutrition supplements
Chitin	Deacetylated form = Chitosan	Biomedical materials, food packaging, fungicides
Pupal exuviae	Moulted skins (shells)	Chitin extraction, bio-based polymer production

Frass: Composition and Agricultural Value

Black Soldier Fly Frass (BSFF) is the solid material remaining after larvae have processed an organic substrate. It consists of undigested feedstock, larval exuviae (shed skins), larval excreta, gut microbiota, and microbial decomposition products. The resulting material is characteristically rich in nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium the three macronutrients central to crop productivity and contains elevated levels of calcium derived from shed larval integuments (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative nutrient composition of Black Soldier Fly Frass (BSFF) vs. conventional compost

Nutrient Parameter	BSFF (% dry weight)	Conventional Compost (% dry weight)
Total Nitrogen (N)	3.2 – 5.6	0.5 – 1.5
Phosphorus (P)	2.0 – 3.8	0.3 – 1.0
Potassium (K)	1.4 – 2.5	0.5 – 1.2
Organic Carbon	25 – 38	18 – 32

Nutrient Parameter	BSFF (% dry weight)	Conventional Compost (% dry weight)
C:N Ratio	6 – 12	15 – 25
Calcium (Ca)	4.5 – 7.2	1.0 – 3.0
pH	7.0 – 8.5	6.5 – 8.0

(Source: Poveda et al., 2021; Veldkamp et al., 2022)

A defining agronomic advantage of BSFF is its narrow carbon-to-nitrogen (C:N) ratio of 6–12, compared to 15–25 in conventional composts (Table 2). This narrower ratio promotes faster mineralisation of organic nitrogen into plant-available ammonium and nitrate forms, resulting in more rapid crop uptake. Field and greenhouse studies have demonstrated BSFF application rates of 3–6 tonnes per hectare improving tomato, maize, and wheat yields by 18–35% over untreated controls, while simultaneously raising soil microbial biomass carbon — an indicator of long-term soil health . Beyond nutrition, BSFF exhibits bioactive properties. Chitin fragments present in the frass act as elicitors of plant innate immunity, stimulating the production of defence enzymes such as chitinase and peroxidase. Several studies have reported significant suppression of soilborne fungal pathogens including *Fusarium oxysporum* and Pythium ultimum following BSFF soil incorporation, suggesting dual fertilisation and biopesticide functions from a single material.

Larval Biomass: Feed and Fuel Applications

Prepupal and pupal BSF larvae, harvested at the point of peak nutrient accumulation before metamorphosis, represent the most energy-dense fraction of the bioconversion system. Dried larval meal contains 35–50% crude protein and 20–35% fat by dry weight, depending on substrate composition and larval age at harvest. Amino acid profiles are comparable to fishmeal, including adequate concentrations of methionine, lysine, and threonine the three most commonly deficient amino acids in crop-based livestock diets.

In aquaculture, partial or total fishmeal replacement with BSF meal has been successfully achieved across multiple species. Trials with Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*), Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*), and rohu carp (*Labeo rohita*) demonstrated comparable or improved growth performance, feed conversion ratios, and survival rates relative to conventional fishmeal diets when BSF meal replaced 25–50% of the protein fraction. For poultry, broiler chickens fed diets incorporating BSF meal at 10–15% inclusion showed improved weight gain and immune competence without adverse effects on carcass quality.

The substantial fat fraction of BSF larvae has attracted attention as a non-food-chain feedstock for biodiesel production. BSF-derived lipids, predominantly composed of lauric acid (C12:0) a medium-chain saturated fatty acid can be transesterified to produce fatty acid methyl esters (FAME) meeting international biodiesel quality standards. Life-cycle assessments suggest that BSF biodiesel, when produced from waste feedstocks, carries a 60–70% lower greenhouse gas footprint than petroleum diesel, primarily because the carbon emitted during combustion originated from organic waste rather than geological reserves.

Chitin and Chitosan: Bioactive Polymers from BSF Exoskeletons

Chitin, the second most abundant biopolymer on Earth after cellulose, is a major structural component of the BSF exoskeleton and shed larval skins (exuviae). BSF-derived chitin content ranges from 4–10% of dry larval body weight, with the pupal exuviae offering a purer chitin fraction than whole-body extraction. Deacetylation of chitin under alkaline conditions yields chitosan, a functionally versatile polycationic polymer whose applications span multiple industries. In agriculture, chitosan functions as a biostimulant, priming plant defence pathways and improving tolerance to drought stress when applied as a foliar spray or seed coating at concentrations of 0.1–0.5%. As a soil amendment, chitosan accelerates decomposition of organic matter by stimulating chitinolytic soil bacteria microorganisms whose enzymatic activity also suppresses fungal plant pathogens. In food preservation and packaging, chitosan films exhibit proven antimicrobial activity against common spoilage organisms such as Escherichia coli, Staphylococcus aureus, and Aspergillus flavus, extending shelf life of fresh produce without synthetic preservatives. Biomedical researchers have demonstrated the value of chitosan in wound dressings, drug delivery scaffolds, and tissue engineering matrices, owing to its biocompatibility, biodegradability, and haemostatic properties. Although insect-derived chitosan has historically competed with crustacean-sourced material (shrimp, crab shells), the regulatory and allergenicity advantages of BSF sources free from shellfish allergens position insect chitin as an increasingly attractive alternative for pharmaceutical-grade applications .

Environmental and Circular Economy Implications

The ecological significance of BSF composting extends well beyond individual by-product applications. Integrated BSF bioconversion systems exemplify the circular bioeconomy model a framework in which waste streams are not disposed of but redirected as inputs to new production systems, minimising landfill dependence and synthetic input consumption simultaneously. Mass balance analyses of BSF facilities processing food waste demonstrate reductions in substrate wet weight of 50–75%, substantial mitigation of methane-generating anaerobic decomposition, and recovery of 15–20% of the processed mass as marketable by-products a triple benefit not achievable through conventional composting or anaerobic digestion alone. In Indian smallholder contexts, low-cost BSF rearing units constructed from locally available materials have been demonstrated to process household food waste while generating sufficient frass to fertilise 0.25–0.5 hectares of vegetable crops per household per season. Pilot projects in Karnataka and Maharashtra have documented 20–30% reductions in household chemical fertiliser expenditure among participating farmers a tangible economic benefit alongside environmental gains. Scaling such systems to peri-urban food-processing clusters or municipal organic waste management programmes represents a credible and near-term application pathway.

Conclusion

The by-products of Black Soldier Fly composting represent a remarkably diverse portfolio of materials whose combined value substantially surpasses that of conventional compost. Frass delivers concentrated and rapidly available plant nutrition alongside bioactive pest-suppressive properties. Larval biomass offers high-quality protein and fat for animal feeds and biofuel, reducing dependence on ecologically costly fishmeal and petroleum. Chitin and chitosan extracted from larval exoskeletons provide a renewable source of bioactive polymers with established roles across agriculture, food science, and biomedicine. Together, these outputs position BSF bioconversion as among the most resource-efficient and multi-benefit organic waste processing technologies currently available. For widespread adoption, particularly across the smallholder agricultural systems that dominate Indian farming, several priorities require attention: standardised frass quality certification frameworks, regulatory clarity for insect-derived feed ingredients, and investment in decentralised rearing infrastructure suited to tropical climates. As raw material costs for synthetic fertilisers and fishmeal continue to rise driven by energy costs and ocean fishery pressures respectively BSF-based alternatives will become progressively more competitive. The BSF bioconversion sector is no longer an emerging concept; with adequate policy support and research investment, it stands ready to contribute meaningfully to sustainable food system transformation.

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