

Compost – Gardener’s Gold

Decomposition, or rotting of organic material, takes place in nature all the time. Plants and animals die, their remains are broken down by the actions of weather, animals and microorganisms. The result is humus, which provides for the replenishment of goodies in the soil. Without a range of nutrients, plants will not grow well.

Farmers and gardeners have long made use of adding organic material to the soil to improve the growth of crops and plants. The use of manure on crops was recorded on the clay tablets of the Akkadian Empire in the Mesopotamian Valley, 1000 years before the birth of Moses.

Dung heaps outside city walls were a regular sight over the millennia, although perhaps not one that featured in the ancient version of Trip Advisor. They were essential for dealing with street and domestic refuse, much of which was manure and straw from animals used for food and transport. More recent developments in waste management have echoed this, with truckloads of green waste from cities being transported to nearby farms to be combined with manures in long ‘dung heaps’. Instead of following the ancient model of being left to rot over a long time, the modern day heaps are turned by machine so that the material is composted as quickly as possible.

The difference between composting and a ‘dung heap’ is that, in a compost heap, the environment is deliberately created to suit the microorganisms which will do the hard work of chomping through the organic matter. It is a bit like having billions of pets to look after. They need just about the same things as your dog or cat, or your children for that matter - air, water and food. The good thing about



microorganisms is that they never complain. They celebrate good times by multiplying and providing you with more workers. A really happy microorganism can divide every five to six minutes!

Compost is sometimes called ‘gardener’s gold’ because it not only provides nutrients but also conditions the soil. That means that, if you have less than perfect crumbly loam soil, the addition of compost will improve the ability of the particles to aggregate or clump together as well as improve water holding capacity. It works whether your soil has too much clay or too much sand. It is truly a case of ‘one size fits all’.

Other benefits of adding compost to your soil include increasing aeration (essential for the transformation of minerals to a form accessible to plants), improving water permeability, lessening extremes of acidity and alkalinity and acting as a growth stimulant. The addition of compost improves the absorption of rain water into the soil, thus reducing run off and erosion. Adding it to your garden is like putting out the welcome mat for the worms, those wonder creatures of the garden. Composting makes use of what would be waste, saving energy and resources by not having it carted away. All in all, composting is a pretty awesome way to help yourself and the environment.

Setting up a heap or purchasing a container is not so hard so give it a go. A non-smelly aerobic heap needs to be at least a cubic metre to reach temperatures high enough to allow it to rot down quickly. Alternate layers of carbon rich material and nitrogen rich material are built up, with the addition of enough water after each layer to make the material as damp as a wrung out sponge. Food scraps and manure are nitrogen rich, dry autumn leaves and straw are carbon rich. Turning the heap mixes the ingredients more, introduces air and allows you to monitor the moisture content. If you are happy to wait for a longer time, just ensure that there is the right amount of moisture, poke the heap now and then to introduce air and sit back and relax.

While alchemists have failed to produce gold from base metals, you can succeed at producing gardening gold from base materials. For anyone wanting a bit more knowledge and some practical hands on learning, we are offering a composting workshop at Garden Gate of Inverleigh Nursery. The workshop includes some theory, some hands on heap making, comprehensive notes, a cuppa and a biscuit.

Winter 2015 Workshops at Garden Gate of Inverleigh

Bookings essential – call Christine on 0403 267 286. All workshops include morning tea and printed notes. Participants need to dress for the weather and farm conditions. Wear closed footwear such as leather shoes or boots. Inside venue for theory aspects.

Composting: Sunday 14th June, 9.30 am – 11am, cost \$15 Theory and hands on. Bring secateurs if possible.

Planning a Backyard orchard: Sunday 21st June, 9 am – 11 am Cost \$20 Theory and orchard tour.

Pruning fruit trees: Sunday 19th July, 9 am – 12, cost \$30 Theory & guided practice in our orchard where the trees are kept low in a vase shape. Bring secateurs.

Garden Design: Sunday 9th & Sunday 16th August, 9 am – 11 am, cost \$50 includes both sessions. Week 1 – Basic design theory, garden tour, garden planning guide, Week 2 – Group feedback on your own garden ideas.

Happy gardening

Christine Windle

Garden Gate Nursery, Inverleigh

Want to be on our email list? You will receive monthly garden articles and information about available produce, workshops, plants and sales. Give us a call on 0403 267 286 or email us at info@gardengatenursery.com.au. Check us out at www.gardengatenursery.com.au
f: gardengateofinverleigh 77 Dundas St (the Winchelsea Rd), Inverleigh 3321