

NORTHAMPTON COMMUNITY GARDEN



NEWS



MARCH 2004

GET READY TO COMPOST!

SPRING WILL SOON BE HERE, and so will gardening. On cold winter evenings we've looked through seed catalogues, checked our notes from last year, and found that we have planned our best garden ever. While most of us focus our plans on the plants we'll grow, we also must consider how we'll take care of the plants once they are in the ground. Soil fertility levels, weed pressure, insect damage, and diseases top the list of concerns.

As an avid organic gardener, and as someone who has seen many farming operations while inspecting certified organic farms, I've concluded that the easiest way to address each of these concerns is by applying compost as a mulch as early in the season as possible.

A well formed, finished compost has a crumbly texture which is easily mounded around the stems of seedlings like peppers, broccoli, and tomatoes. It can also be spread over the soil surface as a mulch prior to germination of large seeded

crops such as beans, peas, and corn. (Spreading over small seeded crops such as carrots must be done with extra care, or the crop will not germinate properly.)

A good compost mulch provides a ready source of nutrients; moderates soil temperatures (roots like this); maintains soil moisture levels; blocks sunlight (and limits germination of some weed seeds); and adds anti-biotic compounds which help reduce the incidence of disease.

Compost also helps plants withstand low to moderate insect pressure. Weeding – always a time consuming endeavor – won't be eliminated by a compost mulch, but mulching keeps the roots of many weeds close to the soil surface, where they are easily removed.

If you'd like to enjoy the benefits of compost in your garden, or if you'd like more information about using (or purchasing) compost, contact Edwin McGlew at (413) 247-9264 or emcglew@pssci.umass.edu.

by Edwin McGlew

DO IT NOW! Don't wait 'til September to complete your Garden work requirement. Pitch in for Cleanup Days, and help make our garden beautiful!

WRITE FOR THE NEWSLETTER! We welcome your contributions of articles, gardening tips, questions, drawings, etc. Contact Betsey: bwolfson@bikher.org.

GARDEN CALENDAR

NEW GARDENER REGISTRATION

SATURDAY, MARCH 27

10 A.M.-NOON

Northampton Recreation Dep't.
90 Locust St.
behind Smith Vocational

GARDEN COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Monday, April 12, 6:30 P.M.

Monday, May 10 6:30 P.M.

Northampton Recreation Dep't.
90 Locust Street
behind Smith Vocational
587-1040

CLEANUP DAYS

Saturday & Sunday

April 24 & 25, 10 A.M.-2 P.M.

Northampton Community Garden

GARDEN COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The Garden Committee meets on the second Monday of each month at 6:30 P.M., at the Recreation Dep't. during fall, winter, and spring, and near the shed in the Garden in summer (weather permitting).

All Gardeners are welcome to attend and participate; check with the Recreation Dep't. (587-1040) the day of the meeting to confirm time and place.

Gardeners are welcome to suggest items for the agenda. E-mail Mimi at mtex@smith.edu or call 584-0317.

VERMICOMPOSTING: COMPOSTING WITH WORMS



Worms – we all love to host them in our gardens, and their presence indicates friable, rich soil. But did you know you can invite worms into your home as well? They'll happily break down your kitchen scraps throughout the year, producing one of nature's most potent fertilizers – castings (aka poop). This odorless "black gold" can give a boost to your houseplants, provide a side dressing for vegetables in your garden, combine with potting mixture for starts, or be given away as a novel and practical gift. A worm bin is simple and cheap to set up and easy to maintain.

10 REASONS TO COMPOST WITH WORMS

- ▶ It saves space in landfills (by recycling garbage)
- ▶ It's economical (saves you and your community the cost of waste disposal)
- ▶ You're creating new soil (the earth loses ~1% of topsoil annually due to erosion and poor agricultural practices)
- ▶ You get virtually free organic fertilizer for your plants
- ▶ Your garbage isn't full of rotting food
- ▶ It's convenient (your compost can be right in the kitchen, and you avoid trips to the dump)
- ▶ You can compost in the winter even when your outdoor pile is frozen
- ▶ It's a "conversation piece"
- ▶ It's an opportunity to learn and teach others about natural processes
 - ▶ Unlike SO many other activities – you don't need a computer to do it!

SETTING UP A WORM BIN

CONTAINER: choose a wide one for more surface area; add holes in top and bottom for ventilation and drainage (try a 14 gallon plastic container).

BEDDING: shred about 5 lbs. of newspaper (no colored ink) into 1" strips.

WATER: soak the bedding in water until it's like a "wrung-out sponge."

SOIL: mix about 2 handfuls into bedding to inoculate it with microorganisms.

BLOCKS: place the bin on 2x4 blocks to increase air circulation from the bottom; you may want to put down newspaper to catch extra moisture.

RED WIGGLER WORMS (*Eisenia foetida*): add 2 lbs. of worms to the bedding.

MAINTAINING YOUR WORM BIN:

Bury up to 1 lb. of food scraps a day per 2 lbs. of worms.

Make sure the food is totally covered!

Rotate the location of each deposit.

Do not add meat, bones, or fats.

Smaller scraps or those that have sat a while will break down faster

HARVESTING CASTINGS:

After about 4 months. . .

DUMP & SORT – Dump the contents of the box on a tarp and spread it out. Shine a strong light overhead until the worms burrow to the bottom. Take castings off the top, returning worms as to the bin with newly prepared bedding. . .OR. . .

HALF-N-HALF – (I've found this method to be quicker and easier) Push the castings to one side of the bin. Fill the empty half of the bin with fresh bedding inoculated with a few scoops from the full side. Bury food scraps in the fresh bedding. Wait several days until the worms have migrated over to the fresh bedding. Remove the castings.

I've been vermicomposting since 1995 and would be glad to answer your questions on this topic: greenzinnia@hotmail.com. Or read *Worms Eat My Garbage: How to Set up and Maintain a Vermicomposting System* by worm guru Mary Appelhof.

— Madeleine Charney

to be continued in the next issue. . .

GARDEN NEWS

SPECIAL THANKS TO

✿ Patricia Wood, for serving on the Garden Committee. She has resigned but continues to be a Garden Neighbor.

✿ Ed Hagelstein, for inventorying, cleaning, and repairing Garden tools.

GARDENING TIPS

When can I start working my plot?

When the soil is sufficiently drained.

How will I know?

Pick up a handful of earth and squeeze it. If you are holding mud, the soil is too wet and you'll damage its structure if you work it. If you have a ball that crumbles readily, you can start digging.

How early can I plant?

If you start seeds indoors, here are vegetables you can start in early March: beets (yes, really!), broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, lettuce, onion, parsley. Flower you can start now are: calendula, petunia, snapdragon. For most gardeners, the first seeds to go into the ground are shelling peas. Wait till the soil temperature is at least 40 ° F – otherwise the peas won't germinate. And, because pea flowers will be killed by frost, it's safer to wait until around the first of April, 4-6 weeks before the last frost. At the same time, you can plant seeds of broccoli, cabbage, kale, lettuce, onions, turnips, and spinach.

To provide maximum warmth for early crops like these, you can

1) Orient rows east to west – a slight advantage

2) Slant raised beds slightly toward the south – a considerable advantage – as much as 10° warmer

— Mimi Teghtsoonian