

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

It is, quite simply, a win-win-win situation. Each of us can reduce the amount of waste we toss in the garbage by one third, improve the health and productivity of our yard and garden, and save money in the process. If you are not already composting (making “black gold”) it is time to start.

A compost heap is an excellent example of the efficiency of nature. The organic material you place in your compost (such as leaves, grass clippings, plant cuttings, and food scraps) are nourishment for many beneficial critters that are often too tiny to see. Bacteria, fungi and nematodes are some of the primary consumers of compost material, as are other critters we are more familiar with like snails, earthworms, millipedes, and sowbugs.

The many different critters work in different ways to break down compost. Surface dwelling millipedes, snails and sowbugs shred plant material, which creates more surface area for fungi and bacteria to do their work. The earthworms and nematodes burrow through compost, eating decaying vegetation and leaving droppings that further enrich the compost. Their tunneling allows air to get into the compost, which further aids the bacteria and fungi.

Then, as is nature’s way, there are other creatures (such as springtails, centipedes, beetles and ants) that live in a compost heap and like to eat the critters mentioned above. They happily munch away on the primary consumers keeping their populations in check. Meanwhile, the fungi and bacteria continue to break down material producing carbon dioxide, water, heat and “black gold”.

There are four basic ingredients that contribute to the health of your compost—air, moisture, size of yard and food waste, and high temperatures. Depending on how you manage your compost pile, you can see yard waste and food scraps change into rich organic soil from as short a period as two weeks to as much as a year. How quickly the material break down depends on the size of the heap, the composition of the ingredients and how you manage your compost.

If you do not produce your own “black gold” consider starting. The following web site will help you http://compostingcouncil.org/pdf/home_composting_faq.pdf , or you can contact The Nature Conservancy’s Roanoke River office at 252-794-1818 for a copy of this information.