

Victoria County Master Gardener Association



People and plants need coffee

Many years ago when I first began collecting house plants, my Great-Aunt Jo told me “Plants are like people. They need their caffeine fix every week or two.”

Every so often, I would pour some diluted coffee on them and wonder if it perked them up. Well, it didn’t seem to hurt them.

More recently, my master gardener

friend Pat Koenig told me to put used coffee grounds in my outside beds. Really? Inside – outside, what’s the deal? Are coffee grounds as fertilizer a good idea? Do coffee grounds used for plants help or hurt?

One of the best ways to use coffee grounds is to compost them. Coffee grounds add nitrogen to compost piles. Coffee grounds and coffee filters can both be composted. Remember that these two are considered green compost material and will need to be balanced with brown compost material. The ratio of brown and green compost should be 4:1.

Green compost such as food scraps, grass clipping, recently pulled weeds, manure and coffee grounds are wet or recently growing materials. These items add nitrogen to compost.

Brown compost consists of dry or woody often brown plant material like dry leaves, wood chips, straw, corn stalks and twigs or small tree limbs. These materials allow air to get in the compost and add bulk and carbon to the pile.

Another possibility for used coffee grounds is to place coffee grounds straight onto the soil as a fertilizer. However, while coffee grounds add nitrogen to compost, they will not add nitrogen to the soil. In addition to nitrogen, coffee grounds can contain nutrients such as potassium, magnesium, calcium and other trace minerals.

As a fertilizer, used coffee grounds add organic material to the soil and improve water retention, drainage and aeration in the soil. Also, these coffee grounds add beneficial microorganisms to plants and attract earthworms. Note that coffee grounds do not attract garden pests but rather deter them.

To use coffee grounds in the garden, apply limited amounts of coffee grounds to the soil in thin, half-inch layers. Work the coffee grounds into the soil around the plants. According to Heather Rhoades, a Gardening Know How author, leftover diluted coffee also works well as a mild, organic fertilizer. Ah, Aunt Jo has support.

Note that coffee beans are water-soluble. Thus, used coffee grounds have a pH of 6.5 to 6.8 and are pH neutral. This fact dispels the concept that coffee grounds lower the pH or raise the acid level of soil. However, coffee grounds can decrease concentrations of heavy metals in the soil.

Some gardeners like to apply used coffee grounds as mulch for their plants. However, this practice can be destructive to plants because the coffee can lump together and block water from getting to the roots. It is better to cast used coffee grounds on top of bark mulch. This way the plants get an undisturbed water supply and the caffeine content is not overwhelming.



Photo contributed by Victoria County Master Gardener Suzanne LaBrecque

Anthurium and ZZ—Indoor plants that thrive on occasional cups of coffee.

Plants that like coffee grounds worked into their soil include acid-loving plants like azaleas, blueberries, carrots, hydrangeas, lily of the valley, radishes and rhododendrons. Certain plants do not like coffee grounds. These plants are those that do not grow well in acidic soil. Some examples are tomatoes, rosemary, lavender and asparagus.

The use of both fresh and used coffee grounds can suppress weeds and some fungal pathogens. Caffeine inhibits plant growth. Therefore, using coffee grounds on weeds can result in lower germination rates. Also, boiled coffee grounds can make a concentrated weed-killing spray.

When used correctly, coffee grounds can enhance gardens. It is an effective natural and safe way to boost plants without using harsh chemicals or pesticides. I will continue to give my house plants their weekly dose of diluted coffee. Will you join me?

The Gardeners' Dirt is written by members of the Victoria County Master Gardener Association, an educational outreach of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension – Victoria County. Mail your questions in care of the Advocate, P.O. Box 1518, Victoria, TX 77901; or vcmg@vicad.com, or comment on this column at VictoriaAdvocate.com.

References:

[Composting with coffee grounds](#)

[The Spruce—Five ways to use coffee grounds in the garden](#)

[Rural sprout Coffee Grounds in the garden](#)