

# 2023-October 21-Gardeners' Dirt

## Composting is a miracle for your garden

by David and Nelda Hensley



PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY NELDA HENSLEY/VICTORIA COUNTY MASTER GARDENER – Compost does wonders for growing things



When we took the Master Gardening Training Course, we became convinced that composting is essential for successful gardening.

Composting is the converting of available organic materials like fallen leaves, grass clippings, weeds, faded blooms, twigs, branches and kitchen scraps into a rich resource for gardens. The process is natural decomposition.

The combination of air, moisture, microorganisms and physical decomposers such as earthworms, bugs, snails, and beetles results in a dark, crumbly, earth-smelling material that keeps both soil and plants healthy.

Composting aids in waste management by reducing the quantity of trash in our landfills and incinerators. Compost enriches soil, helps prevent erosion, conserves water and reduces the need for fertilizers and pesticides.

Composting does require time and energy from gardeners. Various methods require different efforts. We will introduce four methods; open-air, trench, leaf-mold and the less common method, vermicomposting.

Open-air method is gathering materials into a pile and letting the natural process begin. Gardeners can help speed the process by chopping or shredding materials, adding water, turning the pile, balancing the percentage of “green” and “brown” materials creating a “hot” pile. It heats up as the organisms work and speeds up the decomposition. At the Victoria Educational Gardens, master gardeners use a three bin, open-air system.

Trenching is an ancient method of dumping refuse. Trenching is simply digging a hole or a trench in the ground, placing your materials in the hole and covering with dirt. Trenching is a great way to make compost from your kitchen scraps. If buried deep enough, about 14 to 18 inches, odors won't be a problem and the organic matter is at the root zone where it's most beneficial.

Leaf mold method of composting is an open-air method that uses a single ingredient-leaves. Gather as many leaves as you can, quantity is important! Add water and let the leaves sit.

Decomposition is done primarily by fungi, rather than bacteria. It is slower and takes a year or more to transform into compost. The leaf mold method is new to the Victoria Education Gardens. The verdict is out!

An additional type of composting is vermicomposting. Vermicomposting is the practice of raising worms in containers for growing the population and capturing the worm castings for use as compost.

The worms happily consume most decomposing food or other organic waste. Kitchen scraps such as fruit and vegetable peelings, rinds, cores, eggshells and coffee grounds are favorites. Worms are big eaters.

They get their nutrition from the microorganisms they eat. Their digestive system breaks down the intake and excretes the waste, the castings. Vermicompost is rich in essential plant nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium.

Recently, we were able to visit Brothers Worm Farm in Kyle, Texas. We described it as “our kind of place” because we enjoyed touring the controlled chaos.

Large bins of worms in various stages of development and mechanized processes for sifting the castings filled the inside of the warehouse. Outside, wind rows of castings ready for packaging and shipping covered the yard. To the average eye, it might have looked dirty. But to citizens who feel responsible for the environment and want to minimize organic matter in our landfills or the gardener who wants to improve the quality of soil, vermicomposting was beautiful.

In *The Best Place for Garbage*, Sandra Wiese says “Composting is NOT trash that you threw away, it is black gold that you threw away. It is an environmentally sustainable, soil enhancing, plant loving, humanity saving, filter wrapped goldmine!” Happy composting!

Resources:

Wiese, Sandra. *The Best Place for Garbage; The Essential Guide to Recycling with Composting Worms*. WiR Press, Bennett, CO 2011

Brothers Worm Farm: <https://www.brotherswormfarm.com>

Gershuny, Grace, *The Rodale Book of Composting*, Rodale, Inc. New York, 2018.

*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](mailto:vcmg@vicad.com), or comment on this column at [VictoriaAdvocate.com](http://VictoriaAdvocate.com).