



## Down to Earth

This month, let's talk about compost. How we make it and how we keep it effective, rodent free, and (sometimes) neat. Next month, we'll get into worms and microbes. And if you have any questions, send them in and we'll try to answer them.

### The Magic Ingredient

Last year, I was stymied by some unusual leaf colour on my prized *Stewartia pseudocamellia*. I looked in all of my "garden geek" books and resource materials to see if it was a nutrient deficiency. Nothing seemed exactly right...was it a problem with potassium, magnesium, or possibly phosphorus? Looking further, I noticed that while the symptoms were different, virtually every nutrient deficiency had the same recommendation. Specifically, for a deficiency of potassium, magnesium, zinc, molybdenum, calcium, nitrogen, phosphorus, sulphur, iron, manganese, copper or boron, there was one consistent recommendation: **add or maintain well-decomposed organic matter**. Of course, there were other recommendations that were specific to the deficiency, such as keeping the soil moist, adjusting the pH, or applying/avoiding certain minerals. But it struck me that I'd be better off taking my nose out of my books and just making more compost!

In addition, one of my geek books also had a quick reference chart for Managing Problem Soils. Yes, there are numerous management strategies for each problem, but—surprise, surprise---**adding organic matter** is also the top recommendation for soggy soils, clay and heavy soils, compacted soils, sandy soils, steep slopes, thin or stony soils, acidic soils, alkaline or saline soils, and diseased soils.

## How to Make It

Let's be honest. There are lots of resources on line and in libraries about how to make compost. So rather than repeating the information here, let's hear the local advice of some of our members:

Lynn Doyle

The key elements of all home composting are no meat, no animal faeces in compost that will be going on edible crops, no invasive species or seeds. Make the container rodent proof and try to place it in an area where it will get warmth from the sun. Try to ensure that additions to the pile are in smaller pieces so they break down faster. Keep the pile moist, not wet. Turn or aerate it regularly to speed breakdown. When it is ready to be emptied, leave some matured material in the bin as a source of microbes to start the process going again, much like a yogurt or sourdough.

Barbara Annable

For over 30 years, Barbara and her husband have been digging a hole in the garden about as deep as a spade. They put in organic matter from the kitchen, cut it up well with the spade, and cover it with soil from the hole. They do this year-round and never have had a problem finding a place to dig, sometimes between rows of vegetables. No compost pile for them. It seems to work well, with lots of worms everywhere in the soil. Chopped up veggies disappear within a couple of weeks, although egg shells take a little longer.

Pam McCready

Pam uses one of the big black plastic bins. She includes all raw kitchen peelings and coffee grounds, but no meats, bread products or items that could attract rodents. She also adds garden weeds and trimmings (especially when they include soil, but is careful to exclude seeds and roots from invasive species). She adds a bit of water in the summer, and turns it from time to time with a fork. She has lots of worms in the pile. In the past, she has raked up leaves in the spring and stockpiled them for layering with grass trimmings. However, this year she is going to try leaving the fallen leaves where they are and covering them with mulch. She is also going to try drilling some holes in her compost bin to improve aeration. She hasn't yet tried any additives to accelerate breakdown, but is tempted to try.

Al Chomica

Al is the master of compost, and we will also feature information on his thermodynamic piles next month in our Keener's Korner. But in the meantime, Al notes the importance of devising rain covers for all of his compost heaps to prevent them from getting drowned out. He doesn't shy away from adding materials to his compost that often attract raccoons and rodents (like flour and grains, fruit mashes, cooked food, bones etc), so he is constantly battling to keep the critters out. He also uses unconventional tools (such as the cement mixer we previously featured in the newsletter) and an old kitchen garburator. The garburator is installed in a protective bucket structure, but left open at the bottom. That way, Al can process garden waste that would otherwise be invasive, such as yellow flag iris, and add the resulting slurry to his compost. In addition to his active compost piles, Al also has a number of thick black plastic bags filled with composing materials and pushed to the back of his garden under shrubs and against fences. As a visitor to his garden, I was amazed at how unobtrusive they were. Check out a great article Al has written on what he DOESN'T put into his compost, also found under the Soil Health tab. [Anyone Cold Composting? Or. What Not to Put in your Compost...](#)  
By Al Chomica, Jan 2020

## What Type of Bin and Where to Put It?

Lynn suggests putting it in the sun, and Al puts it wherever he can find a space, adapting the type of composting he does to the location he has.

The black plastic bins are effective, especially with holes drilled into the sides for increased air flow. Another idea for adding air to any type of compost system is to drop a few sections of perforated PVC drain pipe into your container before you start to fill it up.

There are all sorts of options, big or small, and high tech or as simple as a pile. The Cadillac of Composting is often thought to be a Three Bin System. The City of Vancouver has an easy-to-follow set of plans for a **Home Built Rodent Resistant Three Bin Compost System** (<http://www.metrovancouver.org/services/solid-waste/SolidWastePublications/CompostBinConstructionPlan-ThreeBin.pdf>), which is estimated to cost about \$300 in materials.

After much bribing, my then teenaged sons built a Three Bin System in Victoria using these plans. I can still see it when I peer over the fence at our old house. I'm hoping to build a new one like it this year in Nanoose. BUT, with two modifications. First, I would like the bins to be different sizes because the compost compacts as it matures. Perhaps compartments that are 4 feet, 3 feet and 2 feet wide rather than the standard 3 feet. Second, it would be much easier if the dividers between the compartments were removable so that one could shovel the compost directly from one compartment to the next. Hmmm, is that even possible to build?

**By Susan Hyatt**