

Interesting Characteristic

Written by Jeff Poppens
Tuesday, May 1, 2012

Human nature has the interesting characteristic of an inevitable ability to overcomplicate simple issues. For example, I could have just said “people make things too complex.” Working with mother nature is so easy that it baffles our minds. I see this often as I consult with other gardeners.

In an urban backyard, a lady has six raised beds, about two feet tall. The plants could be healthier, and I asked about the soil. “It is pure compost,” she said. It looked like undigested organic matter to me.

“Where did you get the ‘compost’?” I asked. “I bought bags of it at the store,” she replied. I felt it and could tell it did not have life. Further inquiry revealed no soil had been used at all.

At this point I dug a hole nearby. As I suspected from the abundant white clover, her soil was naturally rich bottomland, just compacted. I loosened it up, added a bit of sand and her “compost,” and had something plants would love to grow in. A hole dug further down from the house turned up gorgeous soil.

Composting is both a breaking down process and a building up process. The end result is a stable, humus-clay complex capable of holding nutrients and moisture that are slowly released as plants need them. Mother nature is an expert composter.

When left alone, an appropriate amount of fallen leaves, along with other organic materials, gets mixed with the waste products from animals and lays upon the soil. Carbonic acid forms when it rains and dissolves minerals from the rocks. This results in a beautiful topsoil.

Much of what clients show me as compost has not broken completely down. Bits of wood chips and leaves will rob nitrogen from the soil to continue their decay. This will cause plants to be yellowish and unhealthy.

Interesting Characteristic

Written by Jeff Poppens
Tuesday, May 1, 2012

The building up process requires microbes. Good compost feels silky and soft, and smells like forest soil. Adding good compost to a new pile insures the presence of these microbes, which can then have families and colonize their new home. They need air, moisture, and a few months to build up a stable humus.

The lady spoken of earlier then showed me her composter. It was a plastic bin that can be turned with a handle, and inside it was her kitchen food scraps. Composting was not happening- no soil, air, water, or microbes. I would be much more simple to dig a trench in her beautiful soil and put the kitchen scraps in it every day and kick a little soil over them.

Mother nature teaches us to slowly decompose organic matter. Let life processes arise out of the death and decay processes. We do not need bags of "compost," which can contain toxic poultry litter, un-rotted wood chips, and products of uncertain quality. We do not need two-foot tall beds, which will have to be watered a lot, or plastic compost digesters. Let's enliven our soils with good compost, and not confound things. Keep it simple.