

Evening meeting - Composting with Baird McMillan.

Baird was trained by Bucks County Council as a community composter, but sadly that scheme is no longer running. He also teaches Horticulture and Agriculture, and his very amusing and “hands-on” talk was full of information.

Compost is a wonderful soil improver and if you make your own it is virtually free. Typically, UK soil consists of minerals, water, air, and about 1- 5% organic matter. Organic matter can become compost and then break down further to become humus, which is the key to good plant growth. Clay particles are the smallest, and gravel the largest particles in soil. He surprised us with the fact that 1 sand particle equals 1,000 million clay particles. Heavy soils have more clay than sand, hold water but tend to crack and shrink in summer. Good for roses and dahlias. Light soils have more sand than clay, and are good for vegetables, being well-drained, but needs more feeding. Loam is about equal in clay and sand. All types will benefit from the addition of organic matter.

He suggested putting a good handful of soil in a jar, top it up with water, shake and allow it to stand for 24 hours. Organic material will be at the top and other layers separate out lower, so you can see how much organic matter your soil contains.

Baird admitted to being a compost freak, and he has 9 compost heaps. A mix of compost, leaf - mould and sharp sand is a good general conditioner. You can use this as a mulch, about 10 - 15 cms thick to restrict weeds and enable enrichment.

Then came the practical bit! He put out three bins, one green for compostable, red for definitely NOT compostable, and a yellow one for material compostable - if treated. We were all given materials and had to decide which bin to put them in. This proved a bit challenging with some things. (Old underpants?!) Compost can be made in 3-4 months if you get it right. A compost bin should be a minimum of 1m square. You do NOT need to put soil in it, as too much soil actually delays composting and can introduce persistent weeds, if not hot enough to kill them off. He suggested burning turves first. He suggested the ideal was half greens (grass cuttings, leaves, vegetation) and half brown (leaf-mould, hay, sawdust, wood shavings, shredded paper, but not glossy stuff) as these carbohydrates feed the bacteria needed to make compost. Make leaf-mould by placing wet leaves in strong black plastic bags with a few drainage holes, and leave for a few months, or place in a chicken wire bin and leave to rot. Do NOT put long tap roots into the compost (dock, dandelion etc.) Fibrous roots are fine and nettles are good. Do NOT put food waste into compost as it attracts mice and rats.

Other DON'Ts are soot, Lime (unnecessary) corks, coal ash (wood ash is ok but best sprinkled round plants) and of course plastics. Remove plastic from packets and tear the cardboard into pieces.

Evergreens and moss can be composted but take ages. Sweetcorn cobs should be cut into pieces. Cardboard cut into pieces can be put into old compost bags and left open to get wet before adding to the heap. Old woollen and cotton garments can be torn into small pieces, elastic and labels removed. Orange peel needs to be finely cut up and eggshells crushed. Turning is absolutely essential to aerate the compost and ensure mixing. If the weather gets very dry uncover the heap and even water it occasionally, or use that free nitrogenous liquid we usually flush down the toilet. (One lady commented she didn't fancy balancing on top of her compost heap!) You can use Garotta but why not use the free stuff?

Baird's take-home message was that you can compost almost anything. Try not to overdo one type of material (don't go mad with grass cuttings) but ensure a good mix of materials, turn it regularly, and cut materials up to speed up the process. We all learned a lot and will hopefully see our gardens showing the benefits of his advice.