The Children's Corner

By Cathi Cote

Family Composting Fun

You might not be thinking about it quite yet, but it won't be long before the first autumn leaves float to the ground. The lush, green gardens of summer will begin to take on fall's signature colors: warm yellows and browns, deep rusts, and striking reds will soon dominate the landscape. While many of us consider fall the perfect time for leaf-peeping, it is also a wonderful time of year to begin (or renew) our compost bins. Composting offers adults and children alike some wonderful lessons about recycling and renewal, and gives insight into the cycle of life in our individual garden spaces.

Help your children to understand the importance of soil improvement and how the process of decomposition supports the environment by involving them in a composting project. If you already have a working bin, show your children a sample of what finished compost looks like. Bring a magnifying glass and look for decomposers like worms, pill bugs, millipedes, tiny springtails, and slugs in the mix. Explain that some of the most important decomposers, bacteria and microscopic fungi, are too small to be seen. Describe how compost provides all of the nutrients that plants need to stay strong and healthy. Once they appreciate why creating compost is so important to the garden, you may find that your kids are more enthusiastic about helping you rake!

Share the "recipe" for good compost with your children, and the steps that you will need to take to create healthy compost. Remember that the ideal compost pile contains a mixture of two thirds browns (carbon) and one third greens (nitrogen). Most gardeners produce roughly this combination of greens and browns in the process of raking leaves, cleaning garden beds, and mowing the fall lawn (assuming that you don't have a mulching mower and aren't using toxic lawn chemicals!). Describe how these ingredients need to be collected, shredded if possible, piled up, moistened with water, and regularly aerated by turning with a pitchfork or other garden tool. Let your children have input as to which steps they might be able to help you with.

Involve the kids in making a bin. Many gardeners already have the black "soil saver" bins; however, these are often too small for fall clean-up purposes. A simple two or three bin compost system constructed with wood or wire fencing is often more practical for corralling and breaking down fall yard debris. No carpentry skills are required! Ten or twelve feet of chicken wire or hardware cloth rolled into a circle and secured with wire makes a suitable bin. Hammer a wood or rebar stake into the ground and secure it to the bin to keep the bin in place. Another alternative is to obtain wooden pallets from a big-box store, which are often given away for free. Three or four of these can be wired together to create an open- or closed-sided bin, according to your preference.

Another composting project that you can bring indoors for the colder months is vermicomposting, more commonly known as a worm bin. Most children are fascinated with worms; even the most squeamish among them usually get over the "icky factor" very quickly once they begin to learn more about these valuable invertebrates. Tell them that you are going to make compost indoors, and that the worms are going to help. Share the fact that red wiggler earthworms will eat up to half of their body weight each day, and that the castings that they produce are full of nutrients. Let your children help you prepare the worm bin, and make "feeding" the worms part of the family's daily routine.

A simple covered plastic storage container is suitable for use as a vermicomposting bin. The container should be solid (not see-through), and about 24" x 18" x 12" or larger. Since worms do need oxygen, a series of ¼" holes should be drilled in the sides of the container about one third of the way down from the top. Once you have the bin, it's a simple matter of buying some peat moss or shredding some newspaper to use as bedding, and obtaining a pound of red wiggler worms. One good local

source for worms is “The Worm Ladies of Charlestown” (www.angoraandworms.com) Do not try to use common garden earthworms, as many are prone to traveling and will quickly attempt to vacate your bin!

Once you have your worms, remember to keep the bedding in the bin moist, like a rung-out sponge. The worms will consume any type of vegetable or fruit scraps, newspaper, cardboard egg cartons, and even dryer lint from cotton or natural-fiber clothing. Follow the same rules as for outdoor composting and never put meat, dairy products, or oily foods in the bin. Hasten the decomposition process by chopping up the materials that you put into the bin into small pieces. In no time at all your worms will begin to grow and multiply, along with your supply of castings! Harvest the bin in early spring by separating the worms from the finished castings, and use your hand-made compost in the garden. To learn more about composting with worms, read Mary Appelhof’s “Worms Eat My Garbage” or have your kids check out the adventures of “Squirmin’ Herman the worm” on *www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/worms/.*

Fascinating Worm Facts

- *There are approximately 2,700 different kinds of earthworms.*
- *There can be as many as a million earthworms in one acre of land.*
- *A worm can live for about four years.*
- *Worms do not have eyes, yet are extremely sensitive to light. An earthworm will become paralyzed after an hour exposed to sunlight.*
- *Worms have no lungs, but instead respire through their skin. Moisture helps this process.*
- *Worm bodies are covered with tiny bristle hairs that grip the earth and help them to move through the soil. As worms move through the earth, they create tunnels that help to bring oxygen to plant roots.*
- *Worms are hermaphrodites. They produce cocoons that look like little yellow or brownish lemons. Each cocoon may contain several baby worms.*
- *Worms have remarkable healing capabilities. If a worm is cut in half, it may be able to grow a new tail; however, the tail end can never grow a new head!*
- *The Austrailian Gippsland Earthworm grows to 12 feet long and 1 ½ pounds.*

The largest earthworm found was in South Africa, and was 22 feet long from tip to tail!