

Spring is upon us; temperatures are rising, perennials are re-emerging, forsythia and spring bulbs are in full bloom. All these welcome signs of spring have sent gardeners, in droves, back to garden centers.

A visit to one of the many local garden centers is sure to send any avid gardener's mind swimming with ideas for the perfect perennial bed or shrub border. While drawn to the beauty of spring flowering bulbs and perennials, gardeners should not forget that it is the less visually interesting products that are the true foundation of any beautiful garden. Perhaps the most important product to add to your shopping cart on the next visit to the garden center is a bag or two of compost.

Compost is recycled, biodegraded organic waste such as manure, leaves, food waste and paper. When these organic materials are heaped together with an appropriate balance of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen and moisture they provide an optimal environment for bacteria and fungi to breakdown the waste into a simple substance referred to as compost.

This simple substance is as valuable as gold to gardeners. Compost is an essential building block of good soil, providing nutrients and improved water holding capacity, thus ensuring healthier plants. Compost improves soil in that it provides a food source for the microorganisms. As these microorganisms feed they make nutrients available, thereby reducing the need to amend the soil with non-organic fertilizers. As a soil amendment, compost also makes the clay soils of Central Virginia lighter and easier to manage. When soils have increased fertility and a looser texture, plants develop strong roots, and strong roots make for plants that are less susceptible to insect and disease damage and more likely to survive periods of drought. These healthier plants demand less irrigation and fertilizer and fewer pesticides to sustain them.

In addition to the benefits compost offers as a soil amendment, it is also a tremendous benefit to the greater environment. Nearly half of the material sent to landfills is organic waste. By composting this material, a significant amount of landfill space can be preserved.

If you have never utilized compost in your garden and landscape, this spring is the time to start. In your lawn, aerate the soil and then scatter one-half inch of compost over the turfgrass. This will help to green up your lawn while at the same time improving the soil's structure and making the turf less susceptible to drought. In your flower beds add one-half to one inch of compost and lightly turn it into the soil, using caution not to disturb the roots of your plants. Add a thin layer of organic mulch over this layer of compost for even more benefit. You will find your plants look healthier and in time the soil will become much easier to manage as you divide perennials and add new plantings.

Compost can be produced in your own backyard by simply saving your food scraps, leaves, and papers and piling them together. Keep the pile moist and turn it occasionally to speed decomposition. Be sure not to add grease or meat scraps to your compost pile as these may draw unwanted animal pests to your garden or may make your pet ill if he accidentally gains access to the pile. If you do not desire to produce your own compost,

or lack the space for a compost pile, there is plenty of compost readily available in the marketplace. Any garden center will have at least one or two bagged varieties, and in Charlottesville there are a few sources of bulk compost.

One bulk compost facility is the Rivanna Water and Sewer Authority's Moore's Creek Facility. There you can purchase compost by the bag or by the ton.

This year during Garden Week, the third week of April, there will be an opportunity to learn more about compost for the home gardener from Steve Murray of Panorama Paydirt.

For more information about composting tune into the PBS production "Virginia Home Grown" on WHTJ, Tuesday, April 26th at 8 p.m. The show is live and provides you with the opportunity to call in with your questions.