The Dirt on Soil!

The quality of the soil is what determines the balance between feasting and starving. In telling the audience at last week's Winter Gardening Series at the Gloucester Library that "there is no such thing as waste, only wasted resources" Rhonda Bowen gave new emphasis to an important subject. Credibility was given to the practice of maintaining a compost pile for the enrichment of garden soil.

Ms. Bowen is Recycling Manager for Hampton roads Sanitation District and as an agronomist has taught turf management and soil science at Tidewater Community College. Gardeners who attended the program, despite being experienced 'compost-ers' learned new things.

Size is important: to create the heat necessary to kill weed seeds and pathogens the pile or bin must measure at least 3' x 3' x 3'. Different authorities may give you different formulas for the composition of the material but the current recommendation is1/3 brown to 2/3 green. The material may be laid in layers or tossed like a salad. Even if it is neatly layered, if the pile is turned, the mix is made. Green material consists of grass (the grass you pull out of the flower bed, not what the lawn mower leaves behind. Those clippings should stay on the lawn.),kitchen vegetable scraps, chicken manure, aquarium water, weeds.

The 'browns' include prunings, dried stalks, leaves, strawy stuff. Do not add dairy products, bones, meat, glossy paper, pet manure, or diseased plants. If you love wielding a pitchfork you can turn your compost to hurry the process. With turning it is ready to use in 3 to 6 months. Without turning, a passive process better suited to some of us less determined gardeners, 9 to 12 months.

Compost piles require sunlight and both air and water. You don't want it to remain soggy so good drainage is important. A spare pallet or a layer of small branches cut to size on the bottom will keep space available for air to move up into the pile. Any material that provides some support can be used at the sides, but it should be spaced to allow for air circulation. Additional air can be provided by inserting vertical pieces of PVC piping punctured with holes into the center of the mass.

It stands to reason that smaller pieces will decay more rapidly, which may give you an excuse to invest in a chipper/chopper device, but you don't want the material so fine that air and water can't move through it easily. Catalogs and the vast shopping online world offer ready made composting products but homemade may be best.

Mathews Master Gardener Marguerite and Paul DeVita using a design found online, have constructed a series of bins that solve the problem of unloading the supply of compost when it is finished. They have made them like those toy cabins constructed of Lincoln logs. The slats slide together forming the sides, a sturdy bin results but it is easily unfastened, allowing the

compost to relax onto the ground and the slats can be carted off to their next assignment. So clever!

The program on composting helped us realize that it is essential to guard our soil by continually improving it. The phrase, 'common as dirt' is wrong: good dirt is rare. Only 7% of the Earth's surface is arable. Population pressures have played havoc with our soil as paving and development have replaced farmland. Those who see unlimited growth as a good thing and are suspicious of sustainability need to be reminded that soil takes a long time to form. There may be millions of microbes at work doing the decomposition of bedrock but it still takes about 500 years to make an inch of soil.

For ginger cooks:

If you love the kick and fragrance that a bit of grated ginger adds to otherwise so-so recipes, you will be happy to know there is a new variation on an old crop – baby ginger. So often the ginger root we find has been waiting for us too long and is fibrous and difficult to handle.

Interest in ginger has been spiked by its medicinal properties, not only as help in motion and morning nausea, but as a possible help against some cancers. The new product is tender, pink, and being less fibrous it should be easier to grate.