

When Even the New is Old

This time of year items of horticultural news arrive along with the avalanche of catalogs and holiday ads. In a way, a part of our brain wants the world to stop whirling so we can dismount and just sit in silence and contemplate the season. There is something about the winter solstice that suggests naps, quiet walks in the woods, conversation over cups of tea.

However the curiosity that is endemic to gardeners clicks in and we want to know what might work to make gardening more cost-effective, more environmentally benign, or more fun! Scientists are looking anew at an old practice. It is said that adding charred organic material, not ashes, to soil will improve it dramatically. It will not merely improve its productive capacity but will increase its ability to trap the greenhouse gases that cause global warming.

Referred to as 'biochar', there is new emphasis on researching its potential. In areas where primitive people burned trees and tilled in the charred remnants, those remains lasted for centuries, helping to slow the breakdown of organic matter and making the soil more nurturing.

Research in Colorado has shown that when biochar is added to soils there is less nitrous oxide and methane emitted. In England, one scientist claims that if biochar were added to soils worldwide, those soils could then sequester all the carbon dioxide in the air. This is theoretical – and, as in perpetual motion machines, there is a lot of slippage in theories.

But in the real world of your own backyard why not try adding biochar? All you need is to remove charred wood, not ashes, from your fireplace or barbeque pit and add it to soil with organic fertilizer. Now you have your own test plot. An organization called "Sustainable Harvest International" says that biochar can be made by constructing a pile of any organic material, setting it on fire, and covering it with soil to exclude air. I don't understand how it would burn without air, but I expect as time goes on more organic gardeners will be experimenting with such techniques and telling us about their successes and failures.

If you have the partly burned remains of a brush pile, why not till it in and plant a few vegetables and let us know how they grow. What I have read leaves me wondering just how bulky these biochar 'remains' remain and if they are chunky, should they be chopped into smaller pieces?

When I read gardening articles I am often left with more questions than answers. Occasionally a reader will be directed to a website for further information but to a lot of us that is more challenge than help. Quite often the information in a good catalog is more specific and more useful than what we read in a magazine article.

There seem to be fewer catalogs in my mailbox this year, partly because I rarely order from them. Sensible, and I am pleased for the saved trees, but I do miss them. They added to the clutter but they were fun to browse.

Catalogs are published now on the theory that it is too cold outside to garden, so that slot of time can be filled reading and planning for spring planting. It is surely easier on your disposition than watching the news. You must admit, there is always something new and different in the items they offer. For example, you might find cowpots an environmentally kind alternative to peat pots. Peat takes centuries to produce so should not be depleted and as long as there are cows there can be cowpots. They are composed of "100% natural composted cow manure." By planting the seedling, pot and all, you add fertilizer to the hole. If you usually shake off the potting soil and mix it into the hole when you transplant, you can break up this pot and add it as well. It is probably safer for the tiniest plants to leave the roots undisturbed and plant the whole thing, don't you think? Right now you may be too busy to consider spring planting, but even in March there will be only 24 hours in a day and seven days in a week. Time constraints are a given: it is our priorities that are flexible.