

MASTER GARDENER COMPOSTING EXPERTS

The yard waste ban is upon us. Many of us are frustrated and a bit panicked about what to do about it. The University of Delaware Cooperative Extension is here to help. Fortunately, Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners have been learning about and using composting, a great way to deal with yard waste, for many years. Best of all, they can teach others, both children and adults, how to compost and why.

If you would like to read a recent article, full of details on how to compost, read “Mother Nature’s Gift” by Christine Facciolo in the Friday, January 11, Wilmington News Journal. I would like to introduce two talented and dedicated Master Gardeners. Both have a special interest in composting. To tell their stories, we will mention some principals of composting, but this piece is really about them and how they can help you put composting to work.

Meet Hetty Francke and Gail Hermenau. They are both expert at teaching the art and science of composting. They both emphasize that composting is easy and anyone can do it!

Hetty has been a Master Gardener since 1987. Eleven years ago, she also had specialized training given by the Cooperative Extension that resulted in her other title of Master Composter. She has worked extensively with the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) and the University of Delaware. She has developed four composting demonstration sites throughout the state. The first site at Bellevue State Park was featured on NBC 10 News late in 2007.

I participated in one of Hetty’s composting workshops at Bellevue Park and found her enthusiasm to be infectious. Even as she is teaching adults, she loves to talk to them about her work with school children. It is obvious that her youth education role is her pride and joy.

Hetty works with students from kindergarten through middle school. Her goals, especially with the older children, include teaching children to have respect for planet earth, to take responsibility for keeping our earth healthy and clean, and giving each child a sense of pride because they are doing their part.

Hetty gives the students a particular treat by bringing in her worm composting bin. This contains red-wiggler worms that can be fed kitchen scraps. While they live in this mainly indoor compost bin, they give back their worm castings, a nutrient-rich soil amendment. As Hetty likes to say, “If the banana peel goes to the land fill, it is garbage. If it goes into the compost bin, it is a resource.” The students, in letters written to Hetty after her classes, love to thank her for opening their eyes to all they can do to help save the earth.

Gail has been a Master Gardener since 2004. She developed the composting demonstration site at the University of Delaware Cooperative Extension, 461 Wyoming Road,

Newark, DE. She has taught and will be teaching backyard and worm bin composting workshops at the Cooperative Extension this spring.

I met with Gail to talk about some easy beginner ways to get into composting. Yard waste that goes into a pile that is watered and turned every three days will become compost in the shortest period of time, but even a pile that is not touched will become compost in about one year. Starting with small size pieces of yard waste and a mix of “green” and “brown” materials is important. Grass clippings would be a green material and dry leaves and twigs are browns. Keep dairy products, meats and grease out of your pile! Also, keep compost piles to manageable 3-4 feet high by 3-4 feet wide, so they will be easy to maintain.

Gail likes to have several small compost piles on her property to have easy access to them and to keep them close to where she will use the wonderful end product, such as on her vegetable garden or in a planting bed. She often layers a pile right over a new garden bed in the fall. The bed will be enriched and ready to plant in the spring.

No yard waste leaves the property at Gail’s. Admittedly, it may take most of us a while to reach that goal! Leaves that aren’t put into the compost pile or mulched right into the lawn with a mulching mower, are put into garbage bags and tucked under the deck. In a year, Gail will have a source of leaf mold that can be used as a top dressing on beds to nourish them and suppress weeds.

The yard waste ban may seem like a trial to us, but it actually will give us a chance to turn living matter into a free product that will make our yards beautiful and make our soils healthy. There are people out there to help you learn these new ways of dealing with yard waste. Reach the Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners at 302-831-2667 in New Castle County, 302-730-4000 in Kent County, and 302-856-7303 in Sussex County. Take a class. Request the “Yard Waste and Composting” handout, or go to <http://ag.udel.edu/nccmg>. Be on the lookout for Hetty Francke or Gail Hermenau. They will be able to teach you a thing or two about composting because: Master Gardeners are always “Helping People Put Knowledge to Work.”

Roberta Frey