

HERMITAGE

Class gets the dirt on compost

February 27th, 2010

Sharon-Herald

By Joe Pinchot

Herald Staff Writer

Cindy Bodnar recently moved back to this area after living in Virginia for some time, and wants to plant a garden, something she hasn't done for years. "I want to do it right," the Hermitage woman said. Her definition of doing it right includes feeding her plants with compost, the decayed remains of kitchen scraps, leaves, grass clippings and other natural material.



David E. Dale/Herald

Master gardener Leeann Vuich-Suso talks about composting to participants in a class in Hermitage.

The material is broken down by bacteria and fungi. "Compost is basically just dirt," said Leeann Vuich-Suso, a Mercer County master gardener who, with Tony McClusky, has taught two composting classes for the city of Hermitage. Ms. Vuich-Suso and McClusky narrated a PowerPoint presentation developed by Pennsylvania State University and the state Department of Environmental Protection to promote composting as a way to reduce waste.

According to the presentation, the average American household produces 650 pounds of compostable waste each year. "I try to be somewhat ecofriendly," Ms. Bodnar said at the second Hermitage class. "I was wanting a way to reduce. Compost is created in a container, ideally a 3-foot cube, with plenty of air and water access, and a way for someone to stir the contents.

The material put into a compost pile, including soil, leaves, food scraps, non-pet manure, grass and garden clippings, hair, sawdust, used potting soil and finished compost, adds microorganisms that break down the natural elements. The bacteria and fungi decompose toxins and fix nitrogen to the soil. Compost is not considered a fertilizer, but it promotes soil health and nutrient retention, attracts worms, improves drainage, loosens heavy clays and suppresses pathogens. Items to keep out of a compost pile include oil, fat, unwashed egg shells (they attract pests and vermin), pet waste, plants infested by disease or insects, lime, wood ash and weeds.

A good compost pile is a balance of slow-decaying, carbon-rich browns — leaves, sawdust, shredded newsprint and office paper — and fast decaying, nitrogen-adding greens, such as vegetable scraps, coffee grounds and grass clippings. Large particles should be cut up to reduce their size, and corn stalks and sticks can be stuck into the pile to allow oxygen to get to the interior.

The pile should be kept as wet as a wrung-out sponge, and turned or stirred about twice a week. A finished pile needs to be left untouched for a few weeks to "cure" before the material is put in gardens, on plants, around trees, mixed with potting soil or dressed on lawns. For fast composting, all of the materials should be added at once, although that requires storage of ingredients until they can be put

into the composter. Ms. Vuich-Suso said she freezes her kitchen scraps until she's ready to put them in her composter.

By adding items to a compost pile regularly, "You're never going to get completely composted compost," she said. She added that a pile can be filtered to pull out the fully composted material.

Hermitage gave away black plastic composters to those who attended the class. City Manager Gary P. Hinkson said the city still has 35 to 40 composters left after the first two classes, and plans to hold more classes in the spring.

The PowerPoint presentation and other composting information is available at the Penn State Web site, www.psu.edu



David E. Dale/Herald

These black composting bins were given to the class.