Question and Answer

Distribute 1-4-2016

Q. How do we maximize production of compost from our compost pile? It takes us at least 6 months for the material we add to decompose so we can use it in the garden!

A. There is a list of practices to consider and follow if you want to produce compost in 3 to 4 weeks after adding the material.

* There must be an optimum mix of green and brown material. Sixty percent green by volume and 40 % brown by volume works well. The green material provides the required nitrogen and includes grass clippings, fresh pulled weeds, and kitchen vegetable waste. The brown material includes leaves, straw, coffee grounds, and shredded brush. The shredded brush must be in small pieces, not more than 10 times the size of sawdust.
* The material needs to be mixed together without being compressed and it should be moist without being soggy.
* If it is difficult to find enough green material, several cups of high-nitrogen lawn fertilizer can provide the missing nitrogen.
* An active compost pile reaches 140 degrees F or more. It will be warm to the touch. If it does not heat up within two days of the mixing of the ingredients- remix the materials, add water and/or add more of a nitrogen source.

Q. We had great luck with the Roma Surprise tomato this fall. Is its seed available or must we buy transplants next spring and fall?

A. Seed for the fast maturing variety is difficult to obtain. Dr. Jerry Parsons and the Gardening Volunteers of South Texas plan on providing seed to cooperating wholesale nurseries for next fall’s transplants, but if you plan to grow the variety this spring, you should collect the seed from you existing fruit. Visit plantanswers.com for the step by step process of collecting your own tomato seed.

Q. We are growing primulas for winter color in the shade this winter. The blooms are spectacular but something is eating the foliage. The plants are in large clay containers so I don’t think the slugs or snails can reach them. Any other ideas?

A. Sorry, but I would still bet on the slugs and snails doing the damage. If you look closely in all the cracks, crevices, and under the mulch, I bet you can find them. The easiest thing, however is to spread a bait in and around the containers. I predict you will be able to find killed snails within a day or too, and the foliage damage will slow. Re-apply the bait every week.

Q. How do you prepare beet greens for the table? We like the roots and have heard that the tops are tasty and nutritious.

A. Beet tops are my favorite greens. I like them boiled with some onion, pepper sauce, and bacon pieces added.

Q. It appears that our large live oak tree that towers over our house has shifted enough to push against a stone post between the tree’s trunk and the roof. It is scary to think it may fall on the house. Is there a recommended way to proceed? It is heartbreaking to think we may have to cut down the tree.

A. It is sad to consider removing a large oak tree but it is better than having it fall on the house. Call in two certified arborists to compare their opinions and to discuss your options. They may suggest cabling or supporting the tree with a post rather than removing the tree. Good Luck!