COMPOSTING AND THE COMPOST BINS IN THE KITCHEN GARDEN AT WATERLOW PARK

For many there is some magic to composting, magic carried out by soil organisms such as worms, soil borne bacteria and fungi which in the right conditions create a friable media which improves the life of the soil without any need for additional fertilizer.

There are different kinds of composting:
Anaerobic - without air; smelly
Aerobic – with air; not smelly
Hot – compost heap heats up and if reaching 60 degrees or more, weed seeds and plant pathogens such as rusts and mildews are mostly killed
Cold composting – a slower process as little heat is generated; weed seeds and plant pathogens are not killed.
You can have hot or cold anaerobic or aerobic processes.

Cold aerobic composting takes place in the Kitchen Garden.
This is because the bins are added to in a piecemeal fashion; they aren't turned and there is little consideration given to the mix of materials. Consequently the breakdown process does not generate much in the way of heat. It isn't really feasible to change to 'hot' composting as someone would have to take responsibility for managing the bins and volunteering to turn the material every 6 weeks during the productive season. This is very hard work. The good news is that cold composting creates a good product – it just takes a little more time. The main drawback, as mentioned above, is that seeds will remain viable in the end product and plant fungal infections will not be killed. Cold composting does not deal effectively with woody material larger than twigs.

To aid in the formation of compost, there are things that help.
- Create a good well mixed bin of nitrogenous material (green watery material) and carboniferous material (twigs and slightly woody stems such as the stems of herbaceous plants). Torn up cardboard is a good source of carbon.
- There should not be too much air in the bin or the material will dry out too quickly and the process will stop.
- When adding material to the bin, make sure is it packed down around the perimeter and not just dumped in the middle.
- The material needs to be slightly damp but not soaking; easily achieved with the use of a watering can.

GUIDELINES FOR COMPOST MAKING

Avoid adding the following to the compost bins.

- perennial weeds – leaves are okay but avoid their roots and seeds
- if your vegetables run to seed, don't put the seeds in the compost bins as the other bed holders may not want those plants popping up in their beds
- if you want to add woody material to the bins such as bay, rosemary and gooseberry stems, you must cut them into small pieces – woody material should not be more than pencil thickness or more than about 10-15 cm long. Don't add rose prunings.
- if plants have rusts or mildew on them, do not put them in the bins.

So, what to do with the above material if you can't compost it.

Collect the material in a rubbish bag or old compost sack and leave it just outside the gardeners' mess area; western end of the white building immediately north of kitchen garden. It will be sent off to be 'cooked' by London Waste and turned into 'green' compost.

What you can put into your compost bins.

- All leafy green or dry material
- Annual weeds (but avoid the seed heads)
- Cardboard - not the shiny stuff which can contain strong dyes, but most biscuit, cereal, shoe boxes are fine torn up.
- Occasionally bed holders have brought kitchen waste from home to supplement the material. This should be restricted to vegetable & fruit peelings – no meat or bread which can attract rats.
- Crushed egg shells are okay as they are a good source of calcium.

Perhaps in Spring when new plot holders start cultivating their beds in earnest, they can get together and talk about a strategy for managing the composting process to best effect.

Written by April Cameron, deputy chair, Friends of Waterlow Park, for the Kitchen Garden plot holders and a useful aide for all gardeners.