Black Gold

By Jennifer Reese, Environmental Chairperson

I ain’t talkin’ ‘bout Texas T here, but about compost – that glorious result of aerobic decomposition of organic material that turns regular dirt into a fertile paradise for plants. Compost is the ultimate example of how the Cycle of Life works so beautifully. Things die, decompose, become incorporated into the soil, and then provide nourishment for new life, thereby completing/restarting the Cycle. It adds nutrients to the soil, improves water retention and aeration, and is a wonderful way of recycling. And the beauty of it is that anyone can compost.

To begin composting, first choose a site to construct the compost pile. You want it to be easily accessible and also give you enough room to maneuver. There are many different constructs for containing compost, but I will stick to four, for expendiency’s sake. First, there is a simple pile. Just start heaping up plant material, and you’re on your way. The only problem with this is that animals can easily get into it. Second, there is the purchased compost bin. Effective, but sometimes pricey. Third, you can buy a plastic garbage can with lid, drill holes in it, and throw yard and kitchen scraps into it. Fourth, collect five wooden shipping pallets from behind stores (they’ll often give them to you for free) and use them to make a bin. Put one pallet on the ground and then stand the other four around its edges to make the sides. Tie them together at the corners to hold everything steady.

Once you have your container ready, you can start composting. The keys things to remember about composting are it needs heat and air. The decomposition of the plant materials will provide the heat, and frequent stirring/turning of the heap will provide the air. So many things can go into the compost. Weeds, yard clippings, leaves, fruit and veggie scraps, paper towels, napkins, and plates, tea bags, coffee grounds, egg shells, you name it. There are a few things that cannot go into it, such as plastics, meat/grease, cheese, and other items that will not readily break down. Bones can be added to compost as long as they have been cleaned of meat first. Some people put meal worms and other additives in their compost, but you don’t have to. Just be sure to turn the pile frequently (at least once a week) so that plenty of air is circulated throughout the material. If you are diligent about tending your compost pile, then you will have friable, fertile, fabulous compost in about a month or two. You can then turn it into your soil and be confident knowing that you are feeding your plants without chemical fertilizers (which were originally developed as chemical weapons during WWII; there’s a reason why terrorists use fertilizer in homemade bombs…) and that you have also reduced your personal contribution to the local landfill. Who knew that black dirt could be so green?