NVS talk: Composting with Mick Poultney

Mick Poultney is well known in the Birmingham area, especially for his composting skills and as he explained he is now using his own compost as a potting mixture for his plants. He is skilled on his allotment where he has installed a regime of raised beds filled with his own compost! Mick also works with disabled children, encouraging them to garden and has been given the Robinson Award by the NVS for this work.

With regards to composting Mick said that there are two approaches, the ‘hot method’ as favoured by John Branham and the ‘cold worm approach’ practised by Mick. This last method is probably the easiest one to be used by us amateur gardeners though the hot method will sterilise the compost. However good clean compost with plenty of mycorrhizal bacteria with a good PH will make a good composting medium.

Mike went on to explain that when he started he split his composting into 3 sections for horse muck, green waste and leaf mould. Now his main composting is done in the composting bins bought from your local council. He also now has bags for up to 14 different ingredients that he mixes using about 2 handfuls each. These include horse manure, green manure from garden and kitchen waste, spent hops, spent peat, droppings from pets, leaves and grass cuttings, cardboard and tealeaves (for carbon) and also topsoil (to provide the necessary bacteria) amongst the varied ingredients.

Everything has to be cut up small or shredded to speed up the composting process. Mike puts his mixture into a 70Ltr bag first and gives it a good shake before spreading it into one of his composting bins. He makes sure that he has some worms to start the process and will buy from the fishing bait shop if necessary. He then adds water and a compost accelerator and covers the compostable mixture with a piece of carpet to keep it warm. Compost Activators include - Garotta, Rockdust, and Mycorrhizal fungi (buy from Wilkos as much cheaper).

Mike will check the compost bin every 10 days to make sure that he can see worms doing their job. Worms must have moist and warm conditions to work efficiently and Mike will insulate his bins in winter with more carpet and paint them white in summer to keep them from getting too hot. His compost is ready after about a month.

There were a few ‘no-nos’ such as worms do not like citrus fruit or peel. Also be aware that straw from some sources may be contaminated with fungicides and herbicides. As an added comment Mick recommended that tap water is not good for your plants and if you have to top up your water butts then add some Jeyes fluid to kill the nasty’s.

As you can see, Mike’s method of composting is producing a ‘multicompost’ and better quality to that sold in garden centres, and he is good at it having filled all his raised beds and now using it to pot up plants.

For myself, my interest is to compost as much as possible and use it to spread over the vegetable garden in Spring to improve both soil texture effectiveness so that going fully into Mike’s procedure is not necessary. However, the main things that I have learnt is that by chopping material small I can speed up the rate of composting and keeping the composting barrels warm and wet will help the worms do their job.