

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

Architects of the underground

BY SIOUX ROGERS



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Way in the distant past, like 35 years ago, the ground around our home had difficulty sprouting anything other than star thistle. Ms. Compulch (“compost” and “mulch”), as my friends call me, came to the rescue with truckloads of dead leaves, mowed grass, straw, carrot pulp, okara (soy pulp)—and the muscles to mix it all together—to begin the birth of healthy soil.

I didn't use topsoil because you really don't need to add it when planting. (You are standing on topsoil.) Bags of the store-bought stuff contain organic bits, like leaves, tree bark, wood chips, grasses—and weeds. This stuff can actually sustain plant life, but it does not have any enriched added amendments, so good luck in maintaining a healthy, vigorous garden. And bugs love weak plants.

Instead of adding topsoil, amend the existing soil with compost, like I did. As compost rots and integrates with topsoil, voilà, you now have humus, the highly decomposed organic stuff from dead plants, crumbled dried-up leaves, dead insects, bugs, and twigs.

Once I had mixed my compost into that dirt that used to grow nothing but star thistle, the news got out. Earthworms discovered a great new restaurant in the neighborhood. They came to eat and stayed to turn the compost to humus.

Earthworms are the unsung heroes of the underworld. “It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly organized creatures,” said Charles Darwin.

These fantastic burrowing creatures are the living, breathing engineers of



Earthworms are the unsung heroes of the underworld (grit.com).



Good-looking humus, the end stage of decomposed compost (getlawnbright.com).

the underworld, eating and recycling organic matter to keep our soil healthy. They eat twice their body weight every day. (If I ate like that, I would be ginormous, but let's not think about that.) Earthworms thrive on low-calorie foods: dead plants, fallen leaves,

fungi, bacteria, and even dead animals.

After these “engineers” are grossly overfull, they (pardon me)—they poop. This poop is called “worm castings” and is about the healthiest superfood you can feed your vegetables and other plants. Worm castings contain 1,000 times more beneficial bacteria, seven times more phosphorus (for healthy root growth), and five times more nitrogen (for healthy green leaves) than the original soil. Also good news: plants are able to rapidly absorb soil nutrients from worm castings.

Worms are helping create humus, the end stage of decomposed compost. In warmer climates the decomposing process may take anywhere from six to 12 months—

somewhere between the gestational time for a porpoise (six months) and a donkey (12 months). In colder climates, it could take longer.

While southern Oregon is not the arctic, it is—guess what—cold here in winter. Without getting into the depths

(pun intended) of compost piles, I

have a few tips that will help you heat up your compost. The idea is to keep the inside of the pile from freezing, as freezing stops the decomposing action. The heat inside the compost pile or bin has nothing to do with your shivering outside. Actually, the heat on the inside goes up or down depending on a few things.

The inside temperature gets warm because there are little wee bacteria in there, kind of dancing and generating heat. Bacteria love big houses, so...keep piling it on. Make the compost piles bigger.

Oops, too many wee bacteria and not enough to eat? What to do?

Who wants a warm cup of coffee grounds on a cold winter morning? The wee bacteria housing corporation does. Coffee grounds are like “protein,” and the wee bacteria dancing around love them. Now the many wee bacteria are really dancing around, making more heat and turning compost into humus.

Monitor the moisture content. It should feel like a well wrung-out sponge.

But what if you end up with soggy humus?

Here come the heroes, the earthworms! These worm fellows excrete nitrogen that will break down the compost to the right consistency of humus. This is a key nutrient for fertile garden soil. Humus and nitrogen are like best friends and help the plants grow.

Salute the earthworms and celebrate World Earthworm Day on October 21!

Dirty fingernails and all,

Sioux Rogers

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