

Juicing up the compost pile



IRENE VIRAG

We've become confirmed juicers at my house these days. It's become habitual but it's got nothing to do with curveballs or congressional committees. And now that spring is here we've extended it to the garden.

It's as easy as putting organic fruit and vegetables through an electric juice extractor and drinking the liquid. We use spinach, carrots, celery and some cucumber, and throw in apples for sweetness, beets for added flavor and a little ginger for a real zing.

What with all those vitamins, we're convinced juicing is good for us. And we like the taste. If there's a negative, it's the high cost of organic produce — I mean there's no way I'm spending \$4 for a cucumber. We can't wait until our own cucumbers, carrots and spinach come up.

The other day we got around to the pulp, which I've been accumulating in an old but operational freezer in the garage. It's not just because I like to collect things; you should see my garage. It's more a case of realizing that what's good for the gardener could be good for the garden. I stirred my husband to action. He opened up the compost bin hidden behind a forsythia bush along the driveway. Then he stuck his hands in the pulp, which was kind of attractive in a Jackson Pollock sort of way, and dumped it in.

Before that, he had exulted over the bin's contents. He'd stuck his hands in that, too, and brought it to me like a kid showing off a LEGO creation.

"Wow," he said. "Look at that compost. It's really black. Wait'll we put that in the garden. We've got black dirt!" He was practically jumping up and down. "We've got black gold!"

"Go wash your hands," I told him. I love saying things like that to him. Besides, the compost really was black, and you can laugh all you want, but I was just as proud as he was. And a memory of a woman named Jeanette Stelman flashed into



NEWSDAY FILE PHOTO, 2006 / KEN SPENCER

Think brown for your soil: Leaves can be mixed with kitchen waste to turn both into "black gold."



NEWSDAY FILE PHOTO, 2001 / JOHN PARASKEVAS

Eggshells, grapes, lemon peels and raw food scraps are good ingredients for compost; tea leaves and coffee grounds, too.

my mind. I know I'm moving around a lot, but bear with me. Gardens trigger memories. It's as if they're stored in boxes and they don't come out chronologically.

Jeanette, who died a few years ago, was our neighborhood's garden guru. When I decided to write this column 13 years ago I sought her out. The first time she visited the jumble I called a garden she pointed out gently that it was "a little overgrown." Then she asked a simple question: "Where's the compost pile?"

"I've been thinking about that," I answered. I felt as if I'd just pleaded guilty to a felony.

Jeanette made it clear that I

shouldn't think much longer. "You can't really call yourself a gardener, you know, unless you compost."

The clincher came when she showed me her compost piles — she always had two going — and her soil. "You should see her dirt," I told my husband. "Forget about new carpeting. I want dirt like that."

I eventually got both. But the dirt holds up better. If Jeanette's looking down from anywhere, I hope she saw my husband with the dark, rich dirt in his hands. And she'd be pleased with my garden. It's not just the drip irrigation, the bright, full sun and the TLC that are responsible for its good looks. It's also



PHOTO BY IRENE VIRAG

An optimum tool for stirring things up: a compost aerator.

the soil. It's my compost.

Making it is like being Rumpelstiltskin. I turn raw vegetable and fruit scraps into black gold. I'm most active during the spring and summer, when I keep an attractive blue bucket in the kitchen for scraps. Leavings that make good compost include nitrogen-rich stuff such as beans, lettuce, potatoes, carrots, cabbage leaves, corn cobs, banana peels and tea and coffee grounds. If you're a Starbucks addict like me — I'm into triple grande nonfat, no-foam lattes, and please, I don't need lectures, I need the espresso — check your local hangout to see if they save grounds for gardeners.

Remember, just raw food scraps. What you don't want — at least not in your compost container — are cooked leftovers. And no fats, oils, grease, milk, eggs — the crushed shells are OK — which keep compost from breaking down.

When I take the stuff outside, it goes into a bin. A lot of people have compost piles, which I find messy, or home-made bins. My husband I are both numbskulls when it comes to building things, so we have a store-bought bin with a cover to keep out rodents and keep the compost cooking. And it really does cook. In the summer the temperature inside the pile can hit as high as 160 degrees as the ingredients are being digested by bacteria. That's how the stuff breaks down into humus — decomposed organic matter that does more for the soil than anything else. As my friend Scott Chaskey in Amagansett once told me, "Compost is a long-term approach, while fertilizers are a quick fix. If you compost well, in most cases you don't have to fertilize."

In the bin or pile, you should be using more than kitchen scraps. The basic idea is to go green and brown. Alternate "green" nitrogen-rich material — like all that uncooked kitchen waste — with carbon-packed "brown" stuff, such as dry shredded leaves, corn stalks and hay. I also throw in some dirt and even aged manure. If you're not organic — and you should be — leave out lawn clippings and make sure no pesticides get into the pile. Moisten it occasionally and turn it every now and then with a compost aerator or pitchfork. Let it decompose and then — in spring and fall — spread your compost in the garden beds.

I also enrich my soil with dried or aged manure. Once, the late Joe Kusick, who had a nursery in St. James and raised llamas — I had to kiss the llamas — gave me several bags of llama dung. I made it into a compost tea and my tomatoes loved it as much as I'm enjoying juicing.

Which brings me back to the beginning. A gardener friend of mine once gave my husband a T-shirt that says "Compost Happens." It does. And it's a good thing, too.

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Coming Thursday

In Part 2, Garden Detective Jessica Damiano comes to the rescue of local gardeners as the growing season gets under way.

