



Heart of England
Organic Group

www.heog.org.uk

CORONA-YOUR-OWN

Helping you to get organic growing despite the disruption
e-Newsletter 7 15 May 2020

Welcome

I'm really happy that members have been sending in their contributions – its a bit like sitting on a train and looking into people's back gardens, but with background info.

What Stuart has been doing

Further details on what I am trying out this year.

The first picture shows flowering cherry, apple, pear and plum trees, plus currants - hoping for a good fruit harvest after exceptional flowering period.

We had an underused polytunnel which I wanted to get going this year, so I have split it up into raised bed areas and I am going for early crops. Second photo is the earlier start and the next 2 weeks later. I am using raised bed areas to allow better working around planting. Crops in so far: potato, cabbage, radish, lettuce, onion, spinach, tomatoes, peppers, squash.

Outside, to try and keep down weeds and weeding , I am growing onions through ground cover mulch sheet. Looks okay so far but we will see what happens by July as I get overwhelmed by weeds on onions and find them difficult to keep weed free.

Whilst in lockdown we decided to clear an area which had sheds, brambles, bindweed etc. All good until I decided to dig over and found half a skip full of builders rubble about 150 mm below the surface, which I know is where materials from previous owner's extension went. I thought as you get older, you get more sensible and do a bit less, but that does not seem the case currently. *(re Brian May's hospitalisation last week – how did he manage to sustain those injuries through "over enthusiastic gardening"? - I've obviously never gardened enthusiastically. GMcG)*



"Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio"

I didn't actually know either of them, but I was very familiar with the lovely, green foliage of my early potatoes from Potato Day, which were growing in containers in the garden. Why I thought to tuck all the tender seedlings in the greenhouse under a double layer of fleece, and move tender plants into the carport,

and then completely forgot the potatoes, I have no idea. The frost Monday night was more severe than I was expecting and blackened most of the visible foliage. I've done some judicious pruning and hope the plants haven't been set back too much – if only I'd taken a leaf out of Stuart's book . . .

Plant support and frost protection *from Stuart*

I have run out of canes I usually use to support tomato plants so I am using old baling twine (you can use string) pegged into ground and tied at top to roof structure with canes not available currently. I just twist tomato plants around string works really well.



Concerned this week about frost so I am covering outside tender plants and potatoes with straw from a local farm - looks a bit wild but does the job. I just dig in after use and plants get protection and grow through the mulch covering.

Tips on making compost from garden and other waste

Inspired by the work and ideas of **Charles Dowding** *from Katie and John*

Compost is one of those subjects that often invite a range of opinions and can sometimes lead to confusion from conflicting advice. However, there are huge benefits to your garden from composting and the main principles are fairly simple. Charles Dowding has made some excellent videos on Youtube offering advice on composting and de-mystifying the process. Here we summarise some of the lessons he has shared.

What are the benefits of composting?

- Reduces the amount of kitchen and garden waste that is thrown away.
- Allows disposal of garden waste like dead leaves so they don't attract slugs to your beds.
- Adds nutrients to the soil to increase fertility and encourages helpful life like worms and nitrogen fixing bacteria.
- Avoids having to buy bagged composts or artificial fertilisers.

Main principles:

1. Getting the balance right - 'Green' Vs 'Brown' waste

Compost heaps need a balanced diet just like us, in this case by mixing different types of waste. Aiming for around a 50/50 mix of greens and browns is a good rule of thumb.

Green (high nitrogen)	Brown (carbon, woody waste)
Raw fruit and vegetable waste from your kitchen	Twigs (these can be shredded and added to the pile)
Tea bags (but make sure they are not made with plastic mesh!)	Cardboard and brown paper (as long as it is not covered in plastic). Remember to remove sellotape
Grass cuttings	Vegetable stumps (these should ideally be cut into smaller pieces)
Raw fruit and vegetable waste from your kitchen	Soil
Coffee grounds (although these are brown, they are treated as 'green' ingredient as they are quite high in nitrogen)	Straw, hay or shredded paper bedding from pets (herbivores like rabbits, guinea pigs or hamsters)
Weeds and garden waste such as vegetable leaves	Wood ash
Manure (horse, donkey, chicken)	

2. Getting the moisture level right

Composting is a process that works to speed up the natural decay of organic material. Most of this is done by bacteria, so the aim is to create conditions where bacteria can thrive. Bacteria needs moisture but if the heap gets too wet, air will be excluded. If it starts to smell like a swamp it is a sign that it is over-saturated. Charles recommends adding scrunched up brown paper or cardboard into the heap to help air to circulate and absorb the excess moisture. He also recommends covering the heap, with something like a plastic sheet, to keep out heavy rain. Avoid too much green waste as it can make the compost wet and soggy. If necessary start a separate 'feeder pile' so that it can be added in gradually along with 'brown' waste.

3. Introducing new air

'Turning' a compost heap is the process of using a garden fork to move the heap into a new area, breaking up clumps and introducing more air into the mix. It is then allowed to sit for a few more months to continue with the natural decaying process. Although this step is not essential, it will help speed up the process of making compost by introducing air that stimulates the bacteria. Charles suggests that turning the contents of your compost heap just once benefits the heap enormously. He recommends doing this approximately 6 weeks after the pile has finished being added to, with the finished compost useable within 8-12 months.

4. Heat is a good sign

If the compost is warm it is a good sign that bacteria is breaking the waste down and turning it into soil. Generally more heat means faster composting, and more green waste helps to increase the temperature. Around 55 – 70 C is a good temperature for an active compost heap (you can buy long stemmed thermometers online to give you a more accurate reading). The heat will also kill harmful spores which can't survive at these temperatures.

Composting myths

Charles likes to debunk some of the myths that his own experience has shown not to be true or at least not seriously detrimental to the composting process.

- **Do I need to exclude weeds or blighted leaves?** Charles says that as long as they are buried with other waste in an active heap, weeds will be smothered and turned into compost. However we do recommend that you use your own judgement and proceed with caution in this area!
- **Should I avoid adding citrus or rhubarb?** According to Charles there should be no problem adding these. Ideally avoid waxed citrus fruit, but all organic fruits should be unwaxed.
- **Is it essential to maintain a certain temperature in the compost heap?** Although heat is a good sign that bacteria are doing their work and helps to speed up composting it is not essential to maintain a certain temperature.

So in summary, as long as your compost heap receives a regular supply of roughly equal amounts of green and brown waste products, is not too wet or too dry and has some air circulation, you should be able to turn this year's kitchen and garden waste into next year's healthy, fertile soil. *For more information visit Charles Dowding's website: charlesdowding.co.uk*

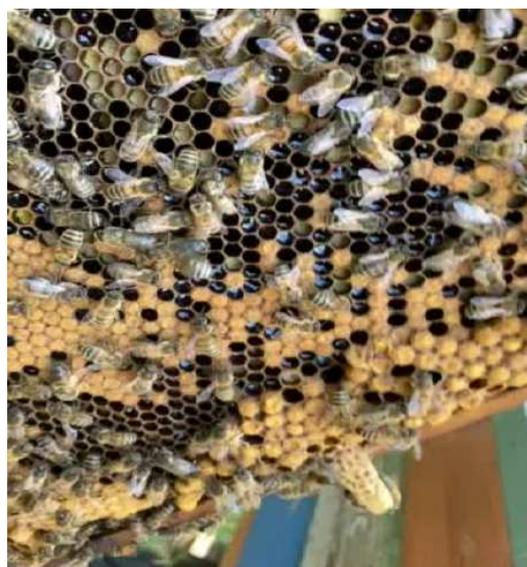


Busy bees *from Stuart*

This is a picture I took this week on frame of bees from one of my hives, showing a wide range of things which generally most people will not see.

The shiny liquid is nectar, which the bees reduce down in water content to produce honey. The small bees are workers (female), larger bee with flat bottom is a drone (male). The brown capped areas are capped eggs transforming into bees within the cell, mainly workers with drone at the bottom and the white larvae are developing eggs prior to being capped.

At the bottom is a large protruding cell which is larger than all others and hangs down vertically. This is where the bees are producing a new queen. This should emerge next week and get mated - I will update on how things go.



Questions and Answers

In response to Chris's problem with black spot on a quince tree *from Barry*

We have two quinces (*cydonia not chnemeles*) - Vranja (for 25 years) and another variety (for only 5 years, and although I was introduced, I can't remember the name just now.) Vranja suffers, both leaf and then the fruit being blackened, whereas the anonymous one doesn't. Vranja is on sand whereas the other is on clay. Quinces like water - I try and give the sandy one a bucket a week (it's on my bucket list) - the other only gets done in a drought. Vranja is in the open, whereas the other is sheltered.

Now I try and keep my fruit trees open so that sun can get to the fruit and wind can blow through. As the plague is probably fungal this could be bad practice for the afflicted quince, as the wind might need to be blocked. Also I should practice good hygiene, and clear up all the leaves, so that the fungus can't overwinter, but instead I leave that to the worms.

So there you have it - keep the plant unstressed, choose the location and soil to suit the plant, choose a good variety, and be a neat and tidy gardener. Or you could change your gardening style and become a natural gardener encouraging biodiversity - bacterial, fungal, plant and animal, and just remember that the world is producing too much food - when our priority should be distribution and storage, and keeping the woven web relationships of the world running.

READ

Resilience in Plant Breeding *from the Sustainable Food Trust*

I've extracted this as a separate document on the HEOG Resources page at www.heog.org.uk as the link was so incredibly long, and we also have at least a couple of members without internet access.

POSTSCRIPT

Feedback from our readers is important, so if you have ideas, news or tips you would like to share, please let us know.

If you have any questions related to organic growing which you think our members might be able to answer, let us know and we will try to include the questions and replies in our newsletters.

You can contact us at enews@heog.org.uk .

Gillian McGivern