Save Those Coffee Grounds To Make Your Plants Grow

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Feb. 14, 2020

Put a ring of coffee grounds around your plants, or water your hostas with coffee. (Photo: Getty Images)

Q. Can I use coffee grounds to fertilize my plants? A friend told me that not all plants like coffee grounds as they are too acidic.

A: Yes, you can use coffee grounds as fertilizer for most plants.

According to studies done by Oregon State University, coffee grounds are about 2% nitrogen by volume and the grounds are not acidic. The acid in coffee is water-soluble so the acid is mostly in the coffee. In fact coffee grounds are close to pH neutral — between 6.5 to 6.8 pH — which is the soil pH where most plants grow best.

Coffee grounds improve soil tilth or structure. By adding them to the soil, you will increase the soil's water-holding capacity and provide a buffet of plant nutrients and beneficial microbes to your garden and landscape plants. The organic matter stimulates healthy root development and helps to de-compact heavy clay.

Coffee grounds (Photo: WFMY)

To use coffee grounds as a fertilizer, they should be spread around the plant and incorporated into the first few inches of the soil; or add them to a garden bed mix into the soil before planting.

If adding a lot of coffee grounds make sure to add some additional nitrogen fertilizer as it will take a while for the nitrogen in the coffee grounds to break down. In the process of breaking down may tie up nitrogen in the soil.

If you don't want to add coffee grounds directly to the soil, you can compost them and then use the compost as a top dressing for plants.

It's not too hard to start a compost pile. You may have heard the phrases “compost happens” or “let it rot.” It’s absolutely true! When you leave certain organic materials alone, they will eventually decompose into wonderful soil amendment. It’s just a matter of how long it takes. If you are lax — and busy — like me, and can be patient, you can throw together a pile of green and brown material, toss it around once in a while, water it and wait for the magic to happen. It may take a year that way. But if you're willing to put in a little more work by turning the pile more frequently, the decomposing happens faster. Either way, the process and recipe to create compost is the same.

For decomposition to happen there has to be a proper balance of food — layers of green and brown materials, air and water.

To build a compost pile:

- Try to create one that is a minimum of three to four feet high and four to five feet wide in order to retain the heat needed to break down the ingredients.
- Layer the organic material and wet each layer. You want the brown layer to be a bit thicker than the green layer, too much green in relation to brown causes the pile to get too hot. Temperatures of 120 to 160 degrees are desired and will kill most weed seeds.
- Once you have the pile built, don't add anything more to the pile.
- Turn the pile over occasionally to give it air/oxygen.

Here are some examples of brown and green compostable materials:

- Green, or nitrogen-containing, material includes grass and shrub clippings that are chopped small, wilted flowers, raw fruit and vegetable trimmings, hair, coffee grounds and tea bags.
- Brown, or carbon-containing, materials include pine needles, dry leaves, straw, sawdust, crushed egg shells, shredded paper and coffee filters.

Don't compost dairy or greasy foods, dirt, ashes, fish, animal products or diseased plants.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.