

Composting

By Duval Reads

Earth here. Once again, I've asked an artist friend of mine to help teach you an important lesson. She drew a picture of me covered with all different kinds of plants and vegetables. Why? This will help remind you that you can get everything you need in order to thrive and survive from me, Good Old Earth.

Even if you don't live on a farm, you can still make a little vegetable garden or grow a few potted plants, whether you want to grow flowers, vegetables, or both. You probably know that vegetables are very good for your body, and there's nothing healthier than a vegetable that you grow in your own garden. Plus, gardens are good for the earth—they provide food for bees and other animals. Do you remember that when we talked about natural resources and trees, we talked about how trees take in the dirty air and then put out fresh, clean air afterward? Gardens also help keep the air a little cleaner and the earth a little prettier.

Today I want to tell you about a special kind of recycling that is good for you, good for your garden, and good for the earth. Once again, my artist friend has made some pictures to go along with the story I'm about to tell.

Meet the Smiths. As you can see, the Smiths prepared a dinner of spaghetti, bread, and salad. After everyone has finished eating dinner, it will be time to clean up. They made a lot of spaghetti and salad, so they'll have some leftovers. Mrs. Smith will put these leftovers in reusable containers and then in the refrigerator for lunch or a snack the next day.

But some of the leftovers can't be eaten. What will the Smiths do with these leftovers? They have a clean-up plan that is friendly to the earth and good for their garden!

It's Mr. Smith's job to clear the table. He puts the trash into the garbage can, and he scrapes bits of spaghetti, tomato sauce, and salad into a small pail.

Then the youngest Smith child, Jamie, adds vegetable scraps leftover from making the salad, such as carrot and cucumber peelings, celery leaves, and loose pieces of lettuce. Jamie could throw these in the garbage, but instead he puts them in the pail. This leftover food won't end up in a landfill. But do you have any idea what will happen to it?

Jamie's brother, Chris, takes the container outside and dumps it into a large bin. What is going on here? Is Chris making leftover soup outside? Do the Smiths love their leftover food scraps so much that they keep a pile of it in their backyard?

Actually, the answer is yes. The Smiths do love their leftover food scraps. You see, the Smiths know that if they put food scraps in a bin to make compost, they will be rewarded in at least two ways. First, they won't have to send as much garbage to the landfill. That is something they can

feel good about; by composting, they are being friendly to the earth and not loading the planet up with trash. Second, if they keep adding to their compost pile and taking good care of it, then they'll end up with a pile of soil full of nutrients for the garden.

The soil that comes from composting is called compost, and it is very good for plants. Putting compost on plants is like feeding them super-vitamins. The compost is full of nutrients that make the plants grow stronger and healthier.

The Smiths are careful to add only materials that make good compost. They don't add meats or oily foods like butter, as these kinds of foods can make the compost smell bad and attract rodents and other wild animals.

Rotten fruits and vegetables—including leftover Halloween jack-o'-lanterns—and eggshells and coffee grounds are perfect for composting. The Smiths also add leaves, grass clippings, and other stuff from the yard that they mix with the leftover foods.

Every week or so, the Smiths stir the compost around with a rake or pitchfork and, when it's particularly dry, they water the pile with a garden hose. Then the sun begins to shine, and the pile heats up. Heat and moisture make the materials in the compost bin break down even faster. Some people even add worms to their compost bins to eat the old food and turn it into garden soil even faster— worms are nature's own recyclers! After a few weeks, the food in the compost bin won't look like food any more—it will look like nice, rich, dark soil.

When the compost is ready, Mrs. Smith scoops a shovelful from the bin. She puts the compost around a new tomato plant she has planted in her garden. The roots of the tomato plant begin to take in water and food from the composted soil. Soon the plant will grow strong and healthy, thanks in part to the nutrients from the compost.

A couple of months later, the tomato plant is big and healthy and full of nice red tomatoes. Jamie helps his mom pick some of the tomatoes on the plant. And what do you suppose happens next?

What happens next is that the Smiths use the tomatoes to make a salad. And what do you suppose they do with the leftovers from that salad? They toss them in the compost pile, of course, so the process can start all over again.