

The allure of trash

Community Garden prepares for winter by composting

FOUAD EGBARIA, Editor

With almost a month of fall in the books, it's not too early to start making preparations for the winter season, because yes, it is coming.

That's exactly what the folks at the Glencoe Community Garden are doing these days: making preparations for the winter chill. While everything might be covered in snow for months on end, that doesn't mean the gardeners there can rest on their laurels (pardon the pun).

With winter on the horizon, one thing dominates the attention of the garden: composting.

"For me, what we're doing now with composting in the garden is one of the most exciting things," said Nina Schroeder, co-founder of the Glencoe Community Garden. "In the three years that we've been gardening, providing food for people in need and educating the community about the hows and whys of growing organic food, we really haven't been able to spend much time on learning how to compost it and complete the cycle of what's going on."

Schroeder mentioned the concept of "completing the cycle" numerous times, or the step in the gardening process of rebirth. Seeds are planted, plants grow, then, when winter nears, any organic waste is then composted, decomposing into usable fertilizer soil for the next growing season, and then left to cure. As the iconic Disney movie "The Lion King" explained in musical fashion, it is indeed the circle of life in action.

Fred Miller, a Glencoe resident who started volunteering at the garden earlier this summer, has helped the garden staff ramp up their composting efforts this year.

"Composting, like composting, is putting together organic materials in a way that you can control the rotting process," Miller said. "All the plants are taking up nutrients as they grow. Ordinarily, that would just be discarded, but you can reclaim those and make fertilizer and growing medium and put it back in the soil."

Not only does the garden use its own organic waste in its composting tumblers, it gets materials from other sources, too. They acquire coffee grounds from Starbucks and other coffee shops, waste from grocery stores and waste from breweries, like Evanston's Temperance Brewery and Chicago's Half Acre Brewery, where they get waste in the form of hops and barley.

"All the stuff which we normally consider garbage actually can be turned back into soil and nourished to plants," Miller said.

While recycling has become a relatively mainstream activity over the years, composting still seems to lag behind, whether for lack of knowledge or for homeowners' reticence to compost in their yards because of any smells the compost may yield.

However, the process of composting, which Miller said is commonly referred to as "cooking," is in fact very easy and, in many cases, can even produce a pleasant smell depending on the waste items thrown into the mix; for example, the peels of citrus fruits can produce a pleasant aroma.

As for the process of cooking itself, it doesn't

simply end with throwing the ingredients into the pot, so to speak. The compost piles must be ground up and turned over time, which speeds up the decomposition process. Just like cooking in the kitchen, composting generates a surprising amount of heat.

"[The composting process] can generate a substantial amount of heat," Miller said. "There are people who use heat from composting to heat up small greenhouses and things like that."

Schroeder said that this year, they've managed to keep their compost piles up to over 130 degrees for the first time — that might sound unbelievable, but it's true. Reach down and grab a handful of compost and you can feel the heat on the palm of your hand.

Miller admitted heating their greenhouse that way would be an "ambitious undertaking," but staff at the garden have discussed that very option for heating their own greenhouse. It is a labor-intensive process, as heat from composting will dissipate the compost pile isn't tended to regularly.

"Doing that in winter," Miller said, laughing, "we'll see."

On Saturday, Oct. 18, the Garden will hold a Rock & Roll Pull, Turn and Throw event, in which they'll invite volunteers to help them pull all of the remaining plants in the garden and throw them into their wooden compost containers for decomposition over the coming months.

The garden will also take in leaves from the community, grinding them up in a space in the back behind the compost piles. They've also discussed starting up a program for people in the community to bring in kitchen waste.

As they ramp up their



Glencoe Community Garden volunteer Fred Miller shows off the difference between uncomposted and composted leaves at the garden in Glencoe on Thursday, Oct. 9. PHOTOS BY FOUAD EGBARIA/22ND CENTURY MEDIA



The composting process is evident here, with raw plant waste on the right, "immature" compost in the middle and the final compost product on the left.

composting process at the garden, Schroeder, Miller and the rest of the garden volunteers hope that they can increase awareness about the value of composting.

"Part of our goal is to serve as a model or even just as an inspiration for people to begin thinking about com-

posting," Schroeder said. "About what they can do to lessen their carbon footprint on this earth. Which I really think is one of the most pressing needs of our time and for our children."

For Miller, learning about composting not only provided useful expertise for the

garden — he's even found the process to be fun.

"You start reading more and more about how you can re-use all these materials and the quantities that are being dumped," Miller said. "It lures you in — it's the allure of trash."