BOOK REVIEW – "COMPOST – The Natural Way to make Food for your Garden"

By Ken Thompson, first published by Dorling Kindersley Ltd in 2007, re-published in 2011. ISBN: 978 1 4053 6229 0. Amazon price: £5.99.

This book of 194 pages does not take long to read, because it does not contain many words per page. However, the well-written text is backed-up by 118 superb photographs which serve to show newcomers to composting what things should look like. The author benefited from the input and support of a large team at Dorling Kindersley.

The book is aimed at those who are new to composting and succeeds as an overall guide: look no further; this is it. The combination of superb photographs and punchy, well-written text is very effective in getting the message across.

The central thesis is that anything which has grown can be composted. Even branches of trees rot down eventually, and more quickly if shredded first. All vegetable and fruit waste from the kitchen, weeds and plants from the garden, grass cuttings, farmyard manure etc can be piled into the compost bin and left for a year (I sandwich layers of grass cuttings between layers of other material to prevent a slimy mass of anaerobic compost forming.) The author explains that soil micro-organisms need nitrogen and phosphorus from compost to make proteins and other vital molecules. The carbon to nitrogen ratio is important – a ratio of 30 is best (the carbon coming from hard-structured waste such as wood and straw and the nitrogen from leafy vegetables and weeds).

The author also debunks the theory espoused by other writers that the compost heap heats up and the heat kills weed seeds as well as making the process rapid. It does not!! As the author says, most gardeners put a little at a time onto the compost heap and there is never enough at one go to cause much heating. No, for most gardeners composting is a slow process: be prepared to wait for one year whilst filling a second bin. (To eliminate the weed seed problem I spread the output of the compost bin on part of the allotment then cover it with a layer of well-rotted cow manure which stops weed seeds germinating.) All leaves should be composted separately for two years in wire cages or compost bins. Keeping the compost moist is more important than letting air in, and the heap should be on soil rather than on a hard surface.

I especially liked one of his phrases: "Digging is for Dummies". He advocates, as I do, spreading the output from the compost heap on the soil and letting the worms incorporate the compost into the soil. Digging chops up the soil mycorrhizal fungi (which are our dearest friends) and damages the soil structure. Leave the soil alone, as Nature intended.

He claims that a 2-inch to 4-inch layer of compost doubles the yield of cabbages, leeks and potatoes. That may be true if one starts with exhausted, impoverished soil. What he does not mention is the health-giving trace elements which come from composted materials and will build-up in the soil and be transported to the roots of plants by soil mycorrhizal fungi.

Now, where does he go wrong? He strongly advocates, right throughout the book, the composting of paper and cardboard. He probably wrote the book before new evidence came to light on printers' inks. He says on page 39 that printing inks no longer contain toxic heavy metals. That may be so, but modern inks contain carcinogenic compounds and I do not want carcinogenic cabbages, thank you!

As for perennial weeds, he advocates killing them off, largely by letting them dry thoroughly, before adding them to the compost heap. However, I have added fresh docks, dandelions, ground elder, bindweed, nettles, thistles and couch grass to my compost heaps for all my gardening life and none have survived. The secret is to keep light away for a long period by burying them under other composting material.

In summary, the book covers the topic of composting adequately and excellently – just leave out paper and cardboard and all will be well. Put into the compost bin only that which has grown, and wait for a year once the bin is full.

MIKE MASON