Learn About Composting Day competes with nine other observances on May 29, according to the website eventguide.com. Among the others are Biscuit Day, National Paperclip Day and Put a Pillow on Your Fridge Day. This is no joke.

Robert Hunter, manager of the Recycling Branch at the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality, hopes that holiday enthusiasts who have to pick just one of these designations for active participation will choose to learn about composting, often called “nature’s way of recycling.” It might be possible to combine two holidays: leftover biscuits could be used in composting, but definitely not paperclips, pillows or refrigerators.

Yard waste—leaves, grass clippings and tree limbs—is banned from most Arkansas landfills. Some have permits to convert the gas from decomposing yard waste to energy. Many communities pick up residents’ yard waste to use in composting programs.

Hunter encourages home gardeners to start their own backyard compost piles so they can know exactly what’s in their compost. “This is especially important for organic gardeners,” he said. “I use my homemade compost for my flowers and vegetables garden, so I have to buy very little fertilizer. Compost
also creates habitat for earthworms, which benefit my lawn because they loosen the soil and add nutrients.”

Basically, a compost pile or bin should comprise 75 percent browns (carbon), which are dry materials such as wood chips, dried leaves, straw, hay, pine needles, and shredded newspapers, cardboard, and junk mail; 25 percent greens (nitrogen), which are fresh, moist materials such as fresh grass clippings, freshly pulled plants, fruit and vegetable scraps, crushed egg shells, coffee grounds, and tea bags; enough water to make the pile damp as a wrung-out sponge; and air. Weekly watering and stirring are recommended.

Compost is ready for application when it’s dark and crumbly, usually after about six months.

Vermicomposting harnesses the power of worms to produce a super-rich soil amendment from food and paper wastes or other organic materials in a covered bin that can be kept indoors. Items needed are an opaque plastic bin and lid, with holes drilled close to the bin’s top; garden soil (not potting soil because it is sterile and may contain chemicals); moistened newsprint (not slick paper ads); and red wiggler worms.

Plants use 97 percent of the nutrients in worm castings, which have a mucus coating that helps keep nutrients from washing away.

Vermicompost can be mixed with equal parts peat moss, perlite and sand to make potting mix. It is also effective to sprinkle some into a seed row or hole when planting seeds or to add a handful to the bottom of the hole when transplanting seedlings.

Earlier this year, Hunter made a presentation about vermicomposting at Fayetteville’s Shaw Elementary School. Abigail Farrell, who teaches fifth grade there, said, “Mr. Hunter brings his teaching to children with such excitement.”
That excitement is contagious. A parent told Farrell that, after Hunter’s presentation, her son talked about worm composting every night and started a worm compost bin at home.

Another student told Farrell, “Who knew worms were such hard workers and they could help us so much!”

Farrell said that five classrooms have started worm composting since Hunter’s visit. She said five students chose worm composting for a school project and helped Hunter teach a vermicomposting session when he returned for their local Earth Day observance at Ozark Botanical Garden.

For more information about composting and vermicomposting or to schedule a presentation for a community or school group, contact Hunter at 501-682-0609, hunter@adeq.state.ar.us.

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