

Yard and Garden –03-05-2011 – Ted Griess/ Extension Horticulture Assistant

O, boiling, bubbling berry, bean!
Thou consort of the kitchen queen-
Browned and ground of every feature,
The only aromatic creature,
For which we long, for which we feel,
The breath of morn, the perfumed meal.

By Arthur Gray

No pun intended, but to prepare for the daily grind I always start my day with a freshly brewed, hot cup of coffee. Sharing a cup or two with Rita the first thing in the morning has become a ritual. We both enjoy this aromatic, full-bodied beverage. When outdoor temperatures allow, one will find the two of us sitting on our deck savoring this magic potion. There we converse, relax and enjoy our coffee while reveling in the splendor and sounds of a brand new day. During the winter months, when it is too cold to be outdoors, one will find us sipping away, enjoying each other's company and the warmth of our fireplace. I must confess. I am addicted to a freshly-brewed, hot cup of coffee with its superior flavor and robust aroma first thing in the morning. This delightful concoction lifts my spirits and gets me going.

Later, when I arrive at work, I usually pour myself another cup; however, as the day progresses, I rarely consume the entire amount. When I do take an occasional sip, all too often the coffee is cold. I dislike cold coffee. Such an encounter leaves me with two options. I can either warm my cup in the microwave or start over with a fresh one. Whichever I choose, by day's end, I usually have a partially filled cup of cold coffee. Again, I have two choices. I could pour its contents down the drain, or I could conveniently pour it onto the soil of the potted plant located directly behind my desk. The fact is, on occasion, if my plant looks like it could use a watering, I select the latter choice.



Whenever I do this, I often wonder, “What effect does coffee have on plants? Is it invigorating and helpful, or does it cause harm?” Since I have been doing this for a number of years and I have noticed no negative effects, I can only assume, that as it is for me, coffee might be a magic elixir for plants. After all, my plant is thriving, and it certainly appears healthy. My observations, however, are not research-based. Such thinking prompted me to investigate.

What little information I did uncover mostly involved the value of coffee grounds and gardening.

According to Extension Consumer Horticulturist Rosie Lerner at Purdue University, “Coffee grounds are a low-level source of nitrogen and a minor source of calcium and magnesium.”

Thus, coffee grounds hold some fertilizer value. Post-brewed coffee grounds are also slightly acidic. One might choose to apply them to acid-loving plants such as rhododendrons, azaleas and blueberries. They might even help to keep hydrangeas blue. Coffee grounds can be composted. The EPA suggests adding no more than a twenty-five percent volume of coffee grounds to a compost pile. It was reported that worm composters find coffee grounds to be an excellent food source for earthworms.

Ms. Lerner referenced one negative aspect of coffee grounds. “Using coffee grounds as mulch must be done sparingly. Because of the fine grind that is typically used for brewing, coffee grounds are likely to pack down tightly, decreasing aeration as well as posing the risk of fungal growth.” Furthermore, a group of Washington State Master Gardeners found that fungus and fruit flies are attracted to wet coffee grounds when used in enclosed compost bins. Perhaps, this might be a reason to avoid using them in the potting soil of your houseplants.

Sadly, I found no research-based information involving the effects of liquid coffee on plants. Subjective comments appeared on an assortment of gardening websites and blogs, but nothing, which was tested in a research setting.

Here is my take. Most city water in our area is slightly alkaline, testing high in pH. Knowing that liquid coffee is slightly acidic and knowing that most plants prefer to be slightly acidic to neutral, I hypothesize that watering occasionally with coffee lowers the pH of the soil, thus benefiting the plant. However, keep in mind; too much of one thing is never good. Knowing this, I do intermittently water my plants with water and pour my unused coffee down the drain.

Surely, many other coffee drinkers have watered their plants with coffee. What is your story? I am interested in knowing.

Lastly, allow me to rewrite Arthur Gray’s poem about coffee.

O, bubbling bean beverage,
With a perfumed aroma.
I long for your pick-me-up qualities.
At the breath of dawn, I seek you out.
You start my daily grind.

By Ted Griess