“My mother told me that fingernail clippings are good for the garden.”

Fingernail clippings, crushed eggshells, coffee grounds, tobacco from cigarette butts—you name it, someone swears by adding it to garden soil.

All of these organic materials ultimately get broken down by bacteria to form humus, a gardener’s term for decayed organic (plant or animal) matter. Humus-rich soil is important for gardens because it supplies nutrients that increase fertility. Humus also helps plants by holding water in the soil.

Tossing organic odds and ends into the garden willy-nilly is one way to give humus a boost, but these offerings are useless to plants until they break down. For this reason, many gardeners opt for a more efficient method: composting.

Composting is the rapid breakdown of organic matter by microorganisms at an elevated temperature. By heaping lots of organic material together in a compost pile, you can encourage a large and rapid bloom of microorganisms. A by-product of this digestion process is heat, which speeds up biochemical reactions and thus speeds the decay. While a leaf on the ground can take months to decompose, a leaf can decompose in a compost pile in just a few weeks.

An amazing variety of things are fair game for composting: yard trimmings, grass clippings, kitchen scraps, manure, and even shredded newspaper, clothes-dryer lint, and pet hair. Things that shouldn’t be added to compost: meat, milk products, fat or grease, weed seeds, and diseased plants.