

## Organic Matter Matters!

By Dave Daly

It's the little things that count... consider organic matter. How often do we think of the decayed plant and animal material that is one ingredient in soil? Referred to as humus (don't even think about spreading this stuff on a pita!), organic matter (OM) is perhaps the most important feature of soils in terms of sustaining life.

Earthworms, fungi, and other decomposers break down the carbon structures of organic matter, creating inorganic compounds that can be absorbed by plants. Decomposed OM is critically important for the supply of nutrients such as nitrogen, sulfur, phosphorus, and iron. Organic matter is also an important component of healthy soil structures. Healthy soils are generally composed of 5% OM, which reduces soil crusting, prevents compaction, and creates an ideal environment for plant shoot and root growth. OM increases the porosity of soils, meaning more space is available for air and water within the soil. Both plants and soil organisms need air and water as much as we humans do. Go Humus!

If you're asking yourself, "What the heck does organic matter do for me?" here's some food for thought. We depend on agriculture for all of our food crops, whether it be corn on the cob, hamburgers, or a bag of Doritos. Vegetable and fruit growth is directly impacted by the health of the soil. The feed used to raise animal products is also dependent upon healthy soils. So the next time you're out in the backyard gardening, take a handful of topsoil, notice its dark color and rich texture, and say "Thanks, organic matter, for making the world a better place."

*To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.*

~William Blake

## FALL SCHOOLS

Fair Street Elementary, Westminster School, Village Montessori, Austin Elementary, Briarlake, Barrow Elementary, Sarah Smith, Kemp Elementary, E.T. Booth Middle School, Ben Hill PLC, R.D. Head, Ridgeview Charter, High Point Elementary, Union Grove

## THEY SAID IT!

**Here are some quotes from students this fall...**

*"I liked hiking because I saw the world from a different perspective."*

*"I learned that we depend on the food chain."*

*"Night walk helped me conquer my fear of the dark."*

*"The coolest thing I saw was the waterfall, felt was the box turtle, and heard were the Cherokee stories."*

**And teachers said...**

*"A wonderful hike and lesson on Forest Ecology! The kids needed this."*

*"I loved to watch the instructors. They were patient and great observers and leaders for the kids."*

## Mysterious...

Do copperheads smell like cucumbers? Many say that this venomous, yet mellow snake gives off just such a peculiar odor when frightened. Copperheads dine on mice, small birds, lizards, and insects such as cicadas. While the cucumber phenomenon has never been proven, one thing is certain: by keeping their prey populations balanced, copperheads are an integral part of our ecosystem.

By Lisa Ferensak

## ADOPT-AN-ANIMAL

Jack Boyette, Parent, Spoty the Salamander

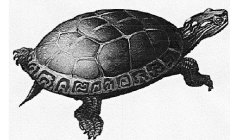
Charlie Bouchillon, Sponsor, Jeter the Timber Rattlesnake

Rachel Dunn-Rankin, Sponsor, Speed the Painted Turtle

Tori Maclean, Sponsor, Poppet the Black Rabbit

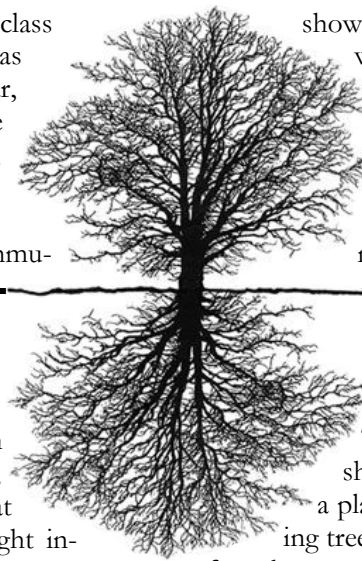
Jessica Keith, Sponsor, Buster the Painted Turtle

Faith Jones, Sponsor, Bruiser Buster Jones the Box Turtle



## Director's Niche By Josh Rood

As each season transpires, I realize more and more how important it is to GET OUTSIDE! If possible, take someone you like with you. The community of nature is vibrant and alive, mysterious and dynamic. Stop, just to stop, and listen to the Brown Thrasher flitting about near the ground. Observe the profound number of organisms forming the micro-community of a rotting log—each living thing doing what it does best, each job getting done. We as a human community can take lessons from the living world that surrounds us. One of nature's biggest lessons, as well as one of the themes teachers can choose here at Blue Ridge, is *interdependence*. The Web-of-Life activity in our Forest Ecology class shows that everything in nature truly is connected to everything else. Are we not a part of that nature as well? A web of interdependence is intricately woven into the fiber of our days. The beetle, the bear, the beaver, the briar—these are just a few of the threads in that web that need each other just as we need each other. Remove one strand and the entire structure could fall. I believe that if we do not want to fall, we must be willing to count on each other. We can depend on each other only if we can open ourselves up to trust in another person. If we can accomplish that, we can do what we do best, and accomplish *our* task in the community of nature.



## I FREEGAN LOVE IT!

By Penny Krakoff

What is a “freegan”? The word combines “free” with “vegan.” While vegans do not eat or use animal products, freegans also refuse to participate in economic systems that harm humans, animals, and the environment. Activities might include waste reclamation (dumpster diving for goods like clean food thrown out by grocery stores at the end of the day), free flea markets, eco-friendly transportation, rent-free housing, and voluntary joblessness.

Why do freegans choose this extreme lifestyle? Freegans believe that “affluent societies produce an amount of waste so enormous that many people can be fed and supported simply on its trash.” A University of Arizona report states that as much as 50% of food in the United States is wasted. Freegans try not to become consumers in a market that utilizes sweatshop labor, displaces indigenous communities, and exhausts resources while throwing away usable products. Instead, they wish to “embrace community, generosity, social concern, freedom, cooperation, and sharing.”

What if you like some aspects of this ideology, but do not wish to start a whole new lifestyle? You can still educate yourself about how you affect the earth and teach others by example. Try reducing, reusing, and recycling waste at home and at the workplace. Simple things like bringing your own bags to the grocery store and avoiding products with excess packaging can be a big help. Use public transportation and carpool when available. Being freegan may not be the right choice for everyone, but all can choose to become aware of their impact on the earth. For more information on freeganism, visit <http://freegan.info/>

## Mycorrhizae???

Try it out loud: my-co-rye-zee. This is a mutually beneficial relationship between a fungus and the roots of a plant. Take a look at a vigorously growing tree outside. Chances are, this plant has a fungal partner. The fungus, extending its threadlike hyphae between or even inside the cells of the root, feeds on carbohydrates produced by the plant. In return, the tiny fungal hyphae aid the plant by providing additional surface area for absorbing nutrients and water from the soil. Often, the fungus also provides enzymes that can help break down nutrients into a form usable by plants. In living soil communities, mycorrhizal fungi provide the link that allows plants, and therefore humans, to flourish.

By Lauren George

If you are considering a trip to Blue Ridge for Spring 2008, **NOW** is the time to call to reserve a date. For more information, call or e-mail:

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*To me a lush carpet of pine needles or spongy grass is more welcome than the most luxurious Persian rug. ~Helen Keller*