

Backyard Composting Made Easy

Composting is a way of recycling organic waste materials that you would ordinarily discard, a way of turning yard waste and garbage into a nutritional soil amendment.

While it may be slow, composting is easy and rewarding.

In addition to producing a great soil enhancer, composting lawn, food and paper wastes can reduce the amount of garbage your family puts out at the curb by 25 percent or more—saving county landfill space and taxpayers' dollars.

When you place household wastes in a compost pile, they serve as raw materials for the composting process. With the additional ingredients of moisture, oxygen and heat, microorganisms within the pile will digest the materials and then decompose them into an end-product, called compost or humus. This is a fortified, soil-like substance that enriches garden soil, making the earth around your plants more fertile.

Humus-amended soil retains water better, reducing the chance of erosion or flooding. Humus is also very crumbly, which allows for more oxygen flow-through, resulting in healthier earth and quicker plant growth.

What To Compost

The organic materials most often composted are leaves, grass clippings, straw, weeds that have not yet gone to seed and plant parts from vegetable and flower gardens.

Avoid using diseased material or plants that have been treated with weedkillers. Do not include meat scraps, bones, dairy products, whole eggs or fatty foods because they break down very slowly and attract maggots and animals. Don't add kitty litter or pet feces; they may transmit disease.

When composting, you might want to separate pine needles and use them as mulch instead. Because they are resin-coated, the needles break down very slowly, said David

Nash, horticultural extension agent with the Brunswick County Cooperative Extension Service. Substitute some other carbon source such as oak leaves for the compost pile.

Another alternative, said Nash, is to "chop the needles up by running over them with a lawn mower. Shredding will expand the exposed surface area and speed composting."

Grass clippings can be composted, but don't need to be with proper lawn management. Nash encourages leaving grass clippings on the lawn as a source of nutrients. If composted, they need to be mixed with other materials or else they may compact.

"If you don't have a sufficient natural source of nitrogen such as grass clippings or manure, you will need to feed that (compost) pile with nitrogen from another source," such as a commercial fertilizer product, said Nash.

How To Compost

The material in your bin will decompose faster if:

(1) waste added to the pile has been chopped or shredded; the smaller the particles the faster the fungi, microorganisms, bacteria, worms, centipedes and beetles can break down the waste;

(2) the waste is shoveled from one pile to another about every two months, and/or stirred/turned with a pitchfork or other tool every week. This helps circulate the oxygen; and

(3) the pile is full and layered properly.

Start the compost pile by putting a 8-inch to 10-inch layer of organic material such as leaves, straw or grass clippings at the bottom of the pile, brown, then green. Water until moist but not soggy. Place a nitrogen source on top of this layer, either 1 to 2 inches of livestock manure or a nitrogen fertilizer or 10-10-10 fertilizer, and top with a 1-

inch layer of soil or old (completed) compost to make sure the pile is inoculated with decomposing microbes. Adding lime isn't usually necessary unless large quantities of pine needles, pine bark, or vegetable and fruit wastes are composted.

Since moisture hastens decomposition, you may want to make a saucer-shaped depression in the top of an open pile to catch rainwater. Regular watering is essential.

The water situation in the compost pile is "critical," says Nash, and gardeners who compost need to make an effort to keep the mixture consistently moist.

"During the winter months we get a lot of rain and the lack of oxygen in the bin can cause odor and slow down decomposition, while in dry summer weather the pile won't work as effectively without regular watering.

"It needs to be kept like a wrung-out sponge, just barely able to ring out a few drops of moisture from a handful of mixture, just moist," he said.

Within three to four days after the pile is built, the center of it should become hot to the touch. The heat (up to 160 degrees Fahrenheit) results from the microorganisms decomposing the material in the pile.

Turn the pile when it begins to cool down. Stir it or rotate it to another bin. Turn it every four days or so to provide air and even heating.

Finished compost should be ready in a matter of weeks or months, the actual time depending on how well the microbial activity is sustained through proper nutrition, aeration and moisture.

When ready for use the compost will be a dark brown, rich-looking humus that is friable, or crumbly, and moist to the touch. This compost can be used to improve clay or sandy soils, or used as a mulch.



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