

Recycle Most Yard Waste By Composting

What are you doing with your pine needles, leaves, and the prunings?

What if someone bundled up money and placed it on the curb to be buried in the landfill? You may conclude that the individual is financially impaired or just plain coy.

Pine straw is selling for over \$4 a bale. Commercially packaged compost is several dollars a bag. Soil-improving compost or mulch is expensive to purchase and apply. However, I routinely see folks that work very hard to throw away these valuable organic materials.

I often see city streets filled with piles of leaves, mounds of garden debris, and (curses!) plastic bags filled with some mixture of leaves and garden debris. The disposal of organic wastes can cost thousands of dollars to bury in the landfill. And thanks to modern plastic bags, organic matter will remain in perfect condition well into the 21st century.

Recycling is nature's way of ensuring a future generation will have the same opportunity to succeed as the preceding generation. Everyone can help the environment and help defray the cost of disposing of organic wastes by composting and using their own organic yard wastes. Using your own yard wastes by composting will save money and create a better soil for plant growth.

Here are some tips that should help you better use the organic debris in your lawn or garden.

Soil organic matter content in most southeastern North Carolina soils is less than one-half of one percent! Northern and Midwestern soils will naturally contain more than 10 times the organic matter of our sandy soils.

For most gardens, soil productivity is directly related to the organic matter content. Heavy rainfall, high temperatures, and active microorganism populations contribute to rapid decomposition of existing soil organic matter. Soils that are not replenished with organic matter will soon be depleted of most or all their organic matter content.

Organic matter improves the ability of the soil to hold nutrients and water, and this creates a healthier soil for plant growth. A healthy soil results in healthier plants. Compost is a natural way to improve soil organic matter content.

Rake, rake, rake. Get leaves or pine needles off your lawn! Heavy leaf or pine needle cover on your lawn during winter spells future lawn problems. Diseases and insects have a field day in the moist environment created by heavy leaf cover on your lawn. Compost leaves, pine needles can be directly used as a mulch but they can also be composted.

Apply agricultural limestone according to soil test recommendations. Agricultural limestone is calcium carbonate (calcitic limestone) or a mixture of calcium carbonate and magnesium carbonate (dolomitic limestone). Limestone neutralizes naturally occurring acidic compounds in the soil. Soil acidity reduces the ability of microorganisms to decompose organic matter.

Soils in the southern United States high in organic matter are often so acidic that most plants cannot grow in them. A good healthy garden soil in the southeastern North Carolina is one that is slightly acid (pH 6). This pH encourages plant growth but does not deter microorganism breakdown of organic matter.

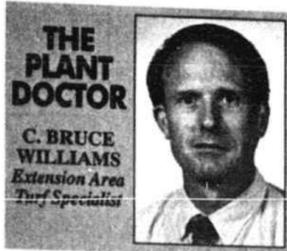
Soil testing is free in North Carolina. Check with your local North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service for addition soil test information.

Start composting! Composting is a very simple, natural, and convenient process. For the average southeastern North Carolina homeowner, an area of 70 square feet or less will compost nearly all of your yard wastes.

The North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service has excellent publications on the construction and design of inexpensive or free compost bins. For example, discarded wooden shipping pallets can be wired together to create a "free" compost bin. Most municipal landfills crush or burn thousands of these pallets each month.

Mulch plant beds. Leaves and pine needles are one of nature's most abundant and quality mulches. A 3- to 6-inch mulch is optimum around most types of shrubbery. However, mulches 12 to 18 inches deep around shade tree roots will not harm shade trees and large shrub plantings. Avoid these super-deep mulches around small shrubs. Most gardeners find that these super-deep mulches will have decomposed to a 5- to 8-inch deep covering by late spring.

Rapid decomposition of yard wastes can be aided by regular mixing. The bacteria, yeasts, fungi, and microorganisms that feed on organic wastes can be helped by routine aeration of the compost. Turn a com-



THE PLANT DOCTOR
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Plant Specialist

post pile every month or so. A pitchfork or potato fork works just fine, but fancier compost turning tools are available which make the job a lot easier. Compost that is not aerated can last a long time.

Leave grass clippings on the lawn. Grasscycling works. If you cut no more than 30 percent of the height of the grass, clippings will fall back into the thatch and quickly decompose. Heavy thatch build-up is caused by grass clippings.

Research has demonstrated that thatch is composed primarily of high lignin content stems and roots. Grass clippings are grass leaves which are 90 percent water and rich in soluble nitrogen and potassium. If you bag your clippings for aesthetic reasons, please mix grass clippings into your compost pile; they will really accelerate decomposition.

Send your gardening questions and comments to the Plant Doctor, P.O. Box 109, Bolivia NC 28422.

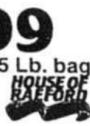


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