

Composting For a Healthy Yard

Stop!

Before you dump your twigs and leaves and other fall and winter lawn debris down the storm drain or in the landfill, consider this environmentally friendly idea. Start a compost pile or bin and leave your yard waste on your land. Composting is a simple, economical way to recycle your household scraps and yard trimmings into a nutritious meal for your soil and your landscape, not to mention the beneficial insects and microorganisms that will also feast on it.

Composting makes sense, because it keeps useful organic materials from filling up the local landfill. In some states, it is now against the law to put organic materials in the landfill, since they are relatively clean and biodegradable, and take up needed space. Another reason to compost is the reward of saving money by having a free soil enhancement, which can be used on your landscape, garden, or shared with your neighbor.

All organic materials decompose. Composting hastens the process by providing an ideal environment for bacteria and other decomposers to thrive. These microorganisms need four elements to do their work: nitrogen, water, carbon, and oxygen. For the best results, mix high-nitrogen materials like clover and fresh grass clippings with high-carbon materials like dried leaves and twigs. Adding wood chips to branches and twigs allows more oxygen to get into the pile and adds a nice fragrance. Rainwater provides moisture, or you can water and cover the pile with a tarp, to keep it moist, if rainfall is in short supply. Turning and mixing the pile lets the oxygen in.

Start

by making a simple pile, use a barrel or bin, or even build a frame from old lumber, bricks, and chicken wire. There are also a variety of prefabricated composting bins available at your local hardware, lawn and garden store, or via the internet. If you prefer, composting can be done inside your garage or shed.

Cold composting works well for those who have little time and not a great deal of yard waste. Start with dried leaves on the ground and add grass clippings. Then just add yard waste as you do your lawn maintenance. The only drawback with this method is that you may have to wait several months to a year for the compost to be ready to use.

Hot composting takes more work, but you can have useable compost in about four weeks. Start out with level ground and lay boards or branches down, evenly spaced to create air circulation. Spread out several inches of high-carbon, (brown) material and add high-nitrogen (green) material and mix together. You can do this in a bin or a pile as well. Water as necessary but don't let your pile become soggy. Too much water will harm the microorganisms, and the pile will rot and smell. The bacteria can do their best work in a mixture of 20-30 times as much brown material as green material, (carbon to nitrogen). A pile, which measures 3' x 3' x 3', works best, but don't let it get taller than 5 feet. Punch holes in the sides to let the air circulate. Your pile will heat up and cool down, so start turning material when the temperature drops. Move the compost from the center to the outside and vice-versa, just like stirring a cake batter in a bowl. Turning every day or two will give you a finished product in less than four weeks. Turning every other week will give results in one to three months.

When your compost is ready to use, it will be a uniform, dark brown, crumbly material which looks and feels like rich, earthy-smelling garden soil. You need to let it cool for a few days before using it.

Compost can be used to amend and enrich your garden soil and landscaping beds. It can even be used in house plant pots and window boxes. Compost enhances soil texture, increases the ability of the soil to absorb air and water, limits weed growth, helps stop erosion, and lessens the need for chemical fertilizers.

Composting Do's and Don'ts

cardboard rolls
eggshells
gray cardboard boxes
sawdust
vacuum cleaner lint
clean paper
fireplace ashes
shredded newspaper
vegetable trimmings
fruit scraps
coffee grounds and filters
leaves and grass
tea bags
wool and cotton rags

black walnut tree trimmings
egg yolks
meat or fish products
fat, oil, grease, or lard
dairy products
pet waste
cat litter
diseased plants

Instead of tossing those grass clippings in the stream where their decomposition will add unwanted nutrients and use up oxygen needed by aquatic creatures, put them to good use to enhance everyone's environment. In nature, everything that happens is part of a cycle, and one creature's waste is another creature's food or shelter. If we think about our own home environment as part of the larger ecosystem, we can learn to use practices that are beneficial to not only our small corner, but to the whole planet that we share.



For more information, contact us at 330-926-2452, or visit our website at <https://sswcd.summitoh.net>

References: <http://www.purdue.edu>

Backyard Conservation, USDA-NRCS, NACD, Wildlife Habitat Council, (available on our website at www.summitswcd.org)