

Learn the ABCs of home composting

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

Compost happens. And it's a good thing it does, or we would all need more than hip boots to get around. Organic matter breaks down or decomposes eventually, except of course, when it's placed in garbage bags and gets buried in a landfill.

Organic matter decomposition takes place whether we are around or not. However, as gardeners, we can speed the composting process and have the finished compost retain the most nutrients for plant use.

Composting is the controlled decomposition of organic materials such as grass clippings and tree leaves using not only aerobic bacteria (ones that need oxygen, not the smelly anaerobic kind) and fungi but also protozoans and worms.

Now, you might be wondering if you have to go out and buy a bag of "starter bacteria" for your compost pile. Compost piles are kind of a "field of dreams" proposition. Build it and they will come. Commercial additives are not necessary and there are no magic enzymes or elixirs.

Finished compost has all the necessary microbes and creatures in it. How convenient! Managing a compost pile is just helping these guys to do their job by providing the food, moisture and oxygen they need.

Magazine articles sometimes

make it sound like you need a degree in biochemistry before you can compost anything. Once you understand the basic principles, the methods and containers for composting can be quite diverse.

Composting really is no more complicated than baking a cake. Most of the ingredients for the compost pile will be grass clippings, leaves and other plant parts from the garden and landscape.

Some things should not be put in the compost pile such as meat and bones, which can attract rodents, raccoons, cats and dogs. Dog and cat manure also should be left out since it can carry disease organisms. Although a well-managed pile should kill most disease organisms and weed seeds, you should leave out obviously diseased plants or weeds that have gone to seed.

Finished compost is "black gold" to gardeners. Forget buying peat moss to add to soils. Use compost instead. It acts as a great soil conditioner by loosening heavy clay soils, improving water-holding capacity of sandy soils and adding all the wonderful microbes, fungi and important plant nutrients back into the soil.

If you want to learn the basics of home composting, be sure to reserve a seat for the upcoming seminar on The ABCs of Home Composting to be held from 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Saturday at the Galveston

County Extension Office, 5115 State Highway 3, in Dickinson.

The seminar will be presented by Ken Steblein, a Certified Texas Master Gardener as well as a Texas Master Composter.

Preregistration is required because of limited seating. Visit or contact the County Extension Office (281-534-3413, Ext. 1-2 or galv3(at)wt.net) to make your reservation.

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Gardeners' Q&As

Q: Why do my cucumbers bloom profusely but do not set any fruit?

A: This is likely to be a pollination problem. Cucumbers have male and female blooms and for proper fruit set, the pollen must be transferred from the male to the female blooms. This is done by pollinating insects, primarily honeybees. If pollen transfer does not take place, fruit will not set.

Q: How do you tell the difference between male and female cucumber blooms?

A: Female blooms have small immature cucumbers located directly behind the yellow petals. Male blooms do not have immature fruit.

Q: Why are ears of sweet corn underdeveloped at the tip



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Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

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A: This is common not only in gardens, but also in large commercial planting. Several explanations have been suggested as the cause including nutrient deficiency, loss of foliage because of disease with correspondingly lower food manufacturing capacity, cool temperatures during ear maturity and low moisture.

Corn is cross-pollinated by wind-blown pollen from the male flowers or tassels at the top of the plant to the female flowers or silks about midway up the stalks. Each kernel develops from an individually pollinated silk.

Kernels develop near the middle and base of the ear first with those at the tip developing last. When unfavorable conditions occur such as those mentioned above, those kernels pollinated first will take precedence over those pollinated last. This often results in failure of the kernels near the tip to develop properly.

