Home Composting Made Easy

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

Finished compost is called "black gold" by gardeners. Composting helps keep lawn clippings, landscape trimmings and other types of green waste out of landfills. Compost is the single most important supplement you can give your garden soil.

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 up the composting process and have the finished compost retain the most nutrients for plant use.

Composting is the controlled decomposition of organic materials (stuff that use to be alive) using not only aerobic bacteria (ones that need oxygen, not the smelly anaerobic kind) and fungi, but also protozoans and worms.

Now you may be wondering if you have to go out and buy a bag of "starter compost" 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.

Garden soil or finished compost has all the necessary microbes and creatures in it. How convenient! Managing a compost pile is just helping these organisms 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 is really no more complicated than baking a cake.

Most of the ingredients for the compost pile will be clippings and plants from the garden and landscape. Leaves and grass clippings may be the largest components. Bags of leaves can be saved to add to the pile.

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 should also 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.

A report issued by the U.S. Composting Council stated that leaves, grass and other yard trimmings and food residuals (including fruits and leafy vegetables) collectively constitute 24 percent of the U.S. municipal solid waste stream. Composting offers the obvious benefits of resource efficiency and creating a useful product.

Compost is a most useful product indeed. 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 Home Composting Made Easy by Master Gardener Jim Gilliam to be held on Saturday, August 24, from 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. at the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office located in Carbide Park (4102-B Main St. in La Marque). Pre-register by e-mail (galvcountymgs@gmail.com) or phone (281-309-5065).

Gardening Q&A

Q: Help! My satsuma tree has a heavy load of fruit but many of the fruits suddenly started to split a few days ago. What caused this and what can I do about it?

A: The day following the first rainstorm last week that broke an extended dry spell, I started receiving inquiries about the cause of citrus fruit splitting. This type of damage typically occurs when citrus trees rapidly take up water from rain or irrigation after a long dry period. The fruit expands and bursts the peel in a crack across the bottom or blossom end of the fruit.

The buildup of excess fluids produces sufficient internal pressure to cause the skin to burst. Young trees have the highest incidence of splitting. Fruit splitting occurs commonly on oranges, mandarins and tangelos. In contrast, grapefruits are rarely affected by this problem. Maintaining adequate and even soil moisture levels by regular irrigation during extended periods of dry weather is the best defense against fruit splitting.