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**AGRIVIEW**

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**With Memorial Day weekend approaching, many Texans are preparing their grills for a family cookout, and to help ensure a safer, more trouble-free time, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service experts are offering some sage advice.**

**It's extremely important that people take extra care if planning to grill outdoors, especially in open areas. Three out of four households have an outdoor grill, and cookouts are a Memorial Day weekend tradition.**

**Data from the National Fire Protection Association shows gas grills were involved in an annual average of 7,200 home fires from 2007-2011, while charcoal or other solid-fuel grills were involved in an annual average of 1,400 home fires. In 43 percent of home outdoor fires in which grills were involved, the fire started when a flammable or combustible gas or liquid caught fire.**

**Before making plans for a cookout in a public area, check to see if there's a burn ban in effect in that area. It's not only dangerous to ignore or defy a burn ban, but there can also be some pretty stiff fines for doing so.**

**Some additional outdoor grilling fire safety tips offered by AgriLife Extension experts and the National Fire Protection Association include:**

**Set up the grill on a concrete surface or on ground where grass and vegetation in the area are trimmed and where there are no dry leaves, brush, mulch piles or other combustibles nearby.**

**Place the grill in an open area away from deck railings, eaves and overhanging branches or other potentially combustible surfaces.**

**If using a gas grill, check for leaks and make sure hose connections are tight.**

**Set the grill at least 10 feet away from your house or building, and do not grill in a garage or under a carport or other surface that might catch fire.**

**Keep young children and pets at least 3 feet from the grill.**

**Remove any grease or fat buildup from the grill and/or in the trays below the grill.**

**Keep charcoal fluid out of the reach of children and away from heat sources.**

**Never leave the grill unattended once the fire has been lit.**

**Do not attempt to move a hot grill.**

**Keep a multi-purpose fire extinguisher within reach.**

**Use flame-retardant mitts and grilling tools with long handles instead of household forks or short-handled tongs.**

**When finished grilling, let the coals completely cool before disposing, and use a metal container for disposal.**

**If using a liquid propane grill, use extreme caution and always follow manufacturer recommendations for connecting or disconnecting the tank.**

**Along with fire safety, food safety is another important factor to consider when grilling.**

**You don't want to remember Memorial Day as the day you or someone in your family got sick from a food borne illness. To keep cookouts safe, it's important to ensure a clean grilling workspace and safe food preparation.**

**Maintaining food quality and freshness by ensuring proper temperatures during its storage and when cooking are vital to food safety.**

**Choose meat, poultry or seafood that is fresh and of high quality. At the grocery store, select your meat last and get it home as soon as possible. If the trip from the grocery store to home is more than 30 minutes, take a cooler for refrigerated items.**

**Fresh poultry, fish, seafood or ground beef should be cooked or frozen within a day or two, and that steaks or pork chops should be cooked or frozen within four to five days.**

**If your meat is frozen, the safest and best way to thaw it is by placing it in the refrigerator a day or two before you plan to cook it. If you have to, you can thaw it in the microwave, but if you do, cook the food right away.**

**If the microwave is used to thaw food, some foods may not thaw out evenly and other parts of the food may be partially cooked, so it's still better to let them thaw out in the fridge. Regardless, never thaw meats at room temperature as this may increase the number of germs related to food borne illness.**

**If refrigerated food is being transported to another location for cooking, it should be kept at 40 degrees or colder, using a cooler and ice or ice packs. And you should only take as much as you plan to cook and eat that day.**

**Raw meat, poultry or seafood should be tightly wrapped or stored in a sealed bag or container and kept in a different cooler to reduce the risk of cross-contamination.**

**Make sure your hands, the cooking area and all cooking utensils are clean to reduce**

the spread of germs to the food. If you're cooking away from home and not sure about a water source where you're going, take your own water and paper towels or use antibacterial towelettes or hand sanitizer.

Unwashed utensils and platters can still contaminate food, even if you've maintained proper food storage, preparation and cooking standards. If you've placed raw meat or fish on a platter before grilling, do not use that same plate to serve the food unless it first can be cleaned with hot, soapy water.

Foods on a grill can brown quickly and look as though they are sufficiently cooked when they are not, so a food thermometer is the only way to ensure cooking to a safe internal temperature. Cook all poultry to 165 degrees, fully cooked meats like hot dogs to 165 degrees and hamburgers to 160 degrees. Beef, pork, lamb, veal steaks, chops and roasts should be cooked to at least 145 degrees. For safety, however, allow these foods to 'rest' for 3 minutes after removing them from the grill before serving.

After cooking be sure to keep the food hot until it is served – at least 140 degrees — otherwise refrigerate it right away. Keep food covered and never let it sit out for more than two hours, and if the weather is 90 degrees or hotter, eat or store it within one hour. The experts usually say 'more than two is bad for you,' but if it's outside, that should be just one hour.

### **BLACK GOLD:**

Homemade compost is popular with gardeners and landscape enthusiasts. Compost is an effective, efficient and natural way to treat the soil and you can make it yourself.

Composting is the controlled biological decomposition and conversion of solid organic material into a humus like substance. Various microorganisms such as bacteria, actinomyces and fungi break down the organic compounds into simpler substances.

During composting, the microorganisms consume oxygen while feeding an organic

matter. By properly managing air, moisture and nutrients, the composting process can transform large quantities of organic material into compost in a relatively short time.

Composting is more efficient when the major factors - oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, moisture and temperature - are properly managed. Finished compost is used as a mulch or soil conditioner.

Compost is made from two basic kinds of materials. One kind includes “brown materials” high in carbon, such as leaves, wood chips, sawdust, hay, straw and shredded paper. The other includes “green materials” high in nitrogen, such as grass clippings, weeds, manure and food scraps. Food scraps may include any fruit or vegetable waste along with peels and seeds, coffee grounds, egg shells and nut shells. One word of caution, do not include meat scraps, bones, dairy products, oils or fat. Also, do not use dog and cat manure.

Mix these carbon and nitrogen ingredients well in your compost bin in a ratio of three parts carbon, or brown ingredients, to one part nitrogen, the green materials. You can add a little soil to help start the process. Add water until the materials are completely damp, but not wet. Stir weekly with a pitchfork to aerate. Within four to five days the temperature will rise, indicating the composting process is under way. If you manage your compost properly, you’ll see that after three or four months the pile will have settled to about half its original height, and the temperature will be lower. The pile should look like dark, crumbly soil with small pieces of organic material, with a sweet, earthy smell. You’ve got compost!

One of the major fears and complaints about backyard compost is the smell. “A

properly managed compost pile doesn't generate odor", the compost expert says, listing five possible causes for a rotten or sulfurous stench; too many food scraps lumped together, too much moisture, grass clippings matted together, ingredients shredded too small and lack of oxygen.

The compost authority looks at the problems and their solutions. If there are too many food scraps, eliminate them or put them in a worm bin. Or, mix the food wastes more evenly throughout the pile. Add coarser brown materials to allow more air between the moist scraps.

If the compost pile is too wet, turn the pile while adding some dry, high carbon materials. The odor eventually will correct itself as the pile drives off excess moisture. Cover the bin during rainy spells. Follow the same technique for grass clippings wadded in a large clump.

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