



FROM A GARDENING PERSPECTIVE...

COMPOSTING MADE EASY

By

Becky Lynch, Palo Pinto County Master Gardener

Compost is an excellent source of organic material that will greatly benefit the health of your garden. It improves soil structure, it is a great source of cheap mulch, and it can even help prevent some plant diseases. Nature makes her own compost by recycling leaves as they fall and plants as they die. Over time these things decompose and become nutrients that feed living plants. Compost helps sandy soil hold moisture and nutrients. It also improves the texture of clay soil. Compost mixed with sand makes a super potting soil for growing container plants.

You too can make compost by setting up your own compost bin. No matter what you do, or don't do, organic materials will eventually decompose into a crumbly, rich, soil-like substance. Without your help, the process will take three months to two years. With your help, the process is much faster.

Ok, let's begin. First, select a spot to set up your compost area. It should be out of the way, but convenient to reach. There should be plenty of elbow room for working your compost. You might set it up near your garden or in a back corner of your yard. It will be helpful to you if the site you choose is near a water source.

The next thing to do is create a bin. There are many commercial composting containers on the market, or you can make your own. A roll of chicken wire will do. For those folks with a small patio or balcony, a plastic bin with a tight fitting lid will suffice.

Now just add some soil, spent potted plants, vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, tea bags, egg shells, etc. and you'll have compost for next season's potted annuals or vegetable garden.

The recipe for compost is not complicated, but there are certain elements that will make you a successful composter. Compost is composed of brown material and green material. The micro-organisms that work in the compost need an even mix of these materials as well as air and water. Brown material consists of dead, dried plant parts, like leaves or pine needles. You can also add shredded black and white newspaper and sawdust. These are high in carbon. Green material consists of grass clippings and vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, tea bags and horse manure. These materials are high in nitrogen.

Build your compost pile in layers. The first layer should be started on the ground. Wet each layer as you go. Start with a layer of brown material about 6 inches deep. Next add a layer of green material, lightly mixing as you go. You may also add a layer of soil. Repeat until your pile or container is mostly full.

Things that should not be added to the compost bin are meat, milk products, grease, bones, pet droppings or diseased plants

To speed the composting process, you may cover the pile with a tarp or other plastic. Turn the material once a week with a rake or pitchfork. This distributes the moisture and microbes while adding air. The microbes need air to do their work. The microorganisms will go to work breaking down all the ingredients. The compost will “cook”. The center of the pile can be warm and actively composting because of heat generated by bacteria, but the outer layers are subject to daily highs and lows. Composting in winter? You bet! Microbes responsible for breaking down organic matter are still active, even when the temperature drops. Put all these ideas together and in a short time you will have your own compost.

Finished compost is dark and has an earthy smell. It is rich in nutrients. It will greatly improve your soil and plants love it. Use compost as mulch around plants. Mix it with soil when planting new plants. It doesn't even matter whether you wait until your compost is finely textured. You can use it when it is still chunky. In fact, lumpy compost makes good mulch. It keeps the bugs and microorganisms busy releasing nutrients into your soil.

For more information you may refer to Texas Agrilife Extension Service online or call The Palo Pinto County Extension office at (940)659-1228