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Fall is right around the corner. That means pumpkins and Jack-O-Lanterns, more turkey that one man could possibly eat in a month, and watching your children open gifts for Christmas. Fall also means something else - Leaves, Leaves, and more Leaves. I periodically get the question what do I do with all of these leaves? An alternative to filling the air with smoke, although the burning of leaves sure reminds us that winter is around the corner, is to compost your leaves.

By composting your leaves and other high carbon trash, you can have inexpensive compost or humus material to put on your flower beds or garden during the spring. Compost will add large amounts of organic material to your soil and will help with plant growth. Listed below are common questions that we receive on the topic of composting.

Compost Questions and Answers

What is compost?

Compost is the partially decomposed remains of plants. In its final state of decomposition it is referred to as humus.

Does compost have any value as a fertilizer?

Yes, because decomposed materials have some nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium content even though in small amounts. The addition of garden fertilizers to speed up decomposition supplies some of the nutrients as well.

Can compost be used as a substitute for fertilizer in the garden?

It can be used as a source of nutrients; however, there are not enough nutrients present in the compost to supply the needs of the vegetable crops. The lack of large amounts of nutrients in compost is far outweighed by the other advantage of the organic material.

Is it necessary to add lime (calcium) to the compost pile?

It is not necessary. Too much lime may cause a loss of nitrogen from the pile. Most finished compost will have near neutral pH.

Is it necessary to add inoculum to the compost pile to activate the composting process?

Inoculation with prepared microbes may hasten the process. However, there are enough microbes present on the material being composted to initiate the process.

What are the best materials for composting?

Most plant material can be used for composting. Leaves are perhaps the best material because of their availability and organic content; however, other types of organic materials such as animal manures, grass clippings, vegetable refuse, small tree limbs and shrubbery trimmings, coffee grounds, and rotted sawdust are considered good composting materials. Do not compost diseased plants, weeds with seeds, or invasive weeds such as morning glory and nut grass; avoid composting feces, meat products, or materials contaminated with chemicals.

Is it necessary to shred materials for the compost pile?

The finer the material is that goes into the compost pile the quicker and more thorough the decomposition.

Do compost piles need turning?

Yes, turn the pile to supply more oxygen for the microbe population and to shift undecomposed material on the edge of the pile to the center where it too will be decomposed.

Do compost piles have offensive odors?

Not as a general rule if composted in a bin with adequate ventilation. If animal manures are used, some odor may be detectable in the beginning but will dissipate as the process accelerates.

When is compost ready to use?

When the pile returns to normal temperature and the organic material crumbles easily. At this point you should not be able to recognize the material that you put in the original pile. The composting process in the average pile takes about 6 to 8 months, though an ideally mixed and tended pile may take less than 8 weeks to become compost.

How can I use compost?

Compost can be used to enrich the garden, to improve the soil around trees and shrubs, as a soil amendment for houseplants and when screened, as a part of seed-starting mix or lawn top dressing. If you have any more questions on composting, please feel free to give me a call.