

HOME & GARDEN

We're not talking trash: Composting is great for any garden

By Daniel Aspell

Though the theories behind composting have been in use for centuries, there is still a certain stigma attached to it in North America. The very civilized gardener, it seems, would rather pay dearly for mulches and fertilizers than handle any refuse for longer than it takes to dump in the garbage can. What they are missing, of course, is perhaps the best plant food that could be developed, and one that is decidedly ecofriendly.

Composting is as natural as the lifecycle of plants; in fact it is an integral part. Rotting plant matter is broken down by microbes, fungi, worms and other recyclers, returning rich nutrients back to the soil. As it is done in nature, so it is done on a smaller scale, in a variety of ways, by a growing number of people. And you don't have to own a lawn or garden patch to compost, as plenty of apartment dwellers have gotten into the act to benefit their rooftop gardens.

Many people confuse a compost pile with a garbage pile, but there are certainly deep distinctions. In a compost pile, only certain types of organic matter are thrown in, not everything that constitutes trash. The two main ingredients in a healthy compost pile are brown matter, like dead leaves, sawdust, newspaper and dry brown plants, and green matter, like vegetable scraps, eggshells, grass clippings and coffee grounds. The faster-decomposing compost piles have a mixture of at least three times as much brown matter as green.

Like all life, the tiny recyclers in a compost pile need air and water. A healthy compost heap should be damp all the way through, especially when being started. Aeration is required, and is easily accomplished by turning the composting mass on a weekly basis with a rake or a pitchfork. This minor amount of tending should have a new compost pile heating up within a week (the heat is a normal, essential attribute of composting).

Now, before you start tossing your orange rinds and tea bags in a corner of your lawn, there are some steps to take. First, find out what your local regulations are regarding composting; some urban areas will only allow commercial composting bins. While not necessarily inexpensive, the store-bought bins are at least sleek and aesthetically designed enough to placate the neighbors. They are also better at keeping out pests than open-air models, and while composting doesn't cause obnoxious odors, a commercial bin really seals in the fumes.

A simple compost bin can be constructed out of untreated lumber, fine fencing material, bricks or even straw bales, which are an excellent brown material. The key points to a home-built system are adequate ventilation, moisture retention and ease of turning the mixture. Start with a layer of garden soil, with maybe a bit of manure to get things cooking.

There are certain items that should never be tossed into a compost pile for various reasons. If you're going to use wood chips or sawdust, be sure that it comes from thor-

oughly untreated lumber, as chemicals, like arsenic, are often present in lumber meant for decks, swingsets and outdoor uses. Likewise, any plant clippings that have treated with herbicides or pesticides should be left out, and avoid diseased plants and pernicious weeds with formidable seeds.

While plant matter from the kitchen is fine, animal products, including dairy, are not. Meat scraps, bones, sweets or salty foods compost poorly and will certainly attract vermin. Adding some horse manure is fine, but definitely avoid other animal wastes which may transmit diseases to humans. Remember, if you're going to use your compost on your vegetable garden, what goes in will be passed to your plants.

When using plant materials, use thin layers, or blend grass or leaf clippings into the already started mixture. To help the process along, chipping or grinding down the dead plant matter will speed up the decomposition.

During warmer months, you should start to see the fruits of your labor in four to six weeks. One day, as you turn the pile, you'll notice crumbly masses of brownish-black material that smells like fresh soil...compost! Use it to fertilize flowers, fruits and vegetables, or as a mulch around bedding areas. In time, you may follow the path of experienced composters, and get a second bin going to keep a steady supply.

		
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