

Home and Garden '83

Bacteria action is needed for compost

Anything and everything which decomposes can be used when making a compost, or so it is said. In actual effect, however, it is how much and to what proportions you use your materials that will either make or break your compost.

A compost is simply organic matter being turned into humus. It can be made from table scraps, lawn clippings, dead leaves and other organic materials which will decompose.

There are several different ways of making a compost although the most common one is referred to as the aerobic method. Decomposition results mainly from the action of bacteria requiring oxygen and will flourish within a temperature range of 48 to 65 degrees C (120 to 150 degrees F). These bacteria breed and work very fast, and when given the right conditions, will produce a usable compost in less than two months in warm weather. In cold weather, however, it will take a little longer, possibly up to four or five months.

When selecting materials, you should attempt to maintain a balance between the amount of carbon and nitrogen. For instance, if you have a lot of wheat and straw which contain high levels of carbon, you should aim to balance it with an equal quantity of manure which is rich in nitrogen. Don't

use hard woods or twigs in your compost as they take longer to break down. Using paper is also discouraged, since it will dampen and retain water. Be careful not to include plants which have been recently sprayed with herbicide or which are diseased in any way as it will contaminate the other materials already in the compost.

Before starting to build your compost you should make sure to choose an appropriate location. An area near a water supply, shielded from harsh weather conditions and on reasonably level ground will assure a greater chance for success.

Compost bins can either be made or purchased at a store. Manufactured compost-makers vary in price anywhere from \$55 to \$100. Homemade structures are usually made of wood, brick and iron with the price depending on both the size and the nature of the materials used. If using a homemade compost bin, it might be a good idea to secure the corner posts with cement or hammer them into the ground to a depth of at least 40 cm (15 in.).

The roof should slope toward the back to allow water drainage away from the heap. It is advisable, for this reason, to have the corrugated iron long enough to allow for a 30-cm (12-in.) overhang at the back.

When adding the various materials

previously mentioned, such as twigs and garbage scraps, make sure to judge whether the mixture is too dry, too wet or just right. If it is too dry, water it with a garden hose until it becomes sufficiently damp. If the mixture is too wet, add dry matter to absorb the excess water.

Activators, both natural and chemical, may be added to the pile to speed up the breakdown. Organic activators may include cow manure, pomace and straw. Chemical activators comprise sulphate and ammonia or any other nitrogenous fertilizers. Most of the activators available in stores consist primarily of chemical nitrogen fertilizer in one form or another. Both types of activators are equally effective and it is mainly a cost comparison when deciding which one to use.

When using green matter in your compost, the layers should be at least six to eight centimetres apart. When the matter has dried and aged, the layers should be expanded to approximately 15 centimetres.

The compost heap may be added to, until it reaches about one and a half metres in height. When the pile is completed it should be covered with a three- to six-centimetre layer of soil before being topped off with the corrugated iron roof. The pile should also be checked regularly for moisture content.

There are many benefits to making one's

own compost. Not only is it cheaper than fertilizer from a bag, it's better. Humus contains micro-organisms which make soil come alive. It provides nutrients and helps to combine and enrich sandy soils, in addition to breaking down heavier soils such as clay. A compost is ideal for top-dressing or mulching flower and vegetable gardens.

Making a successful compost can be easy if you do it correctly. Many failures result from haste when making the original heap or from lack of attention once the compost has

been established. One of the most important things to remember is not to let the heap become too wet or too dry. Also make sure there are equal proportions of carbon and nitrogen, since a severe lack of one or the other will cause slow, if not stagnant decomposition within the compost. Loss of heat through gaps in the bin is another problem to watch for. And finally, check that all materials are chopped up and properly mixed when being placed onto the heap so they are able to decompose easily.

Tools need sharpening

Clean, sharp garden tools will make summer gardening more enjoyable, according to the gardening specialists in the Lawn & Garden Products Group at C-I-L.

Dirty and/or rusty spades, hoes, rakes, shovels and other small hand tools pick up a coating of soil at each thrust. This not only makes using them hard work, but they do not turn the soil nearly as efficiently as clean tools.

A wooden spatula will remove dried earth and coarse steel wool or emery paper will remove rust and corrosion from steel tools. Moisture stubborn rusty or corroded spots

with oil and let sit for a couple of days and they should polish up easier. In some instances it will be necessary to polish badly corroded tools with a power wire brush. A touch up with a medium file on the cutting edges of spades and hoes will make them easier to use.

Once tools are bright and sharp it takes only a minute before putting them away to clean and oil them. A wipe with an oily cloth containing a light lubricating oil will protect them between jobs.

Clean tools will also last much longer.

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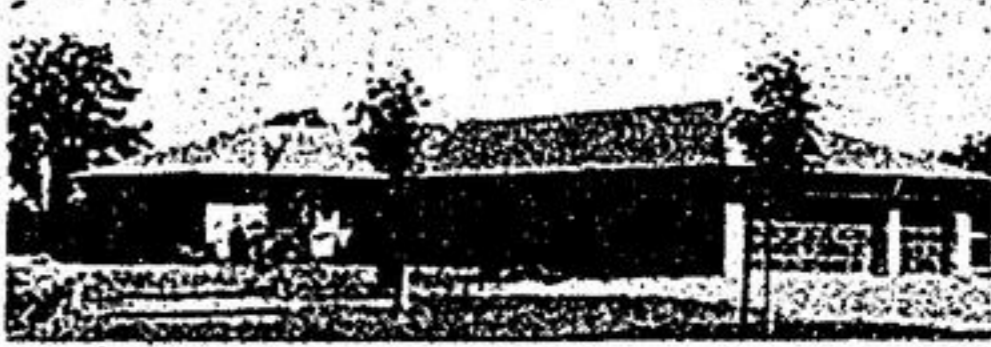
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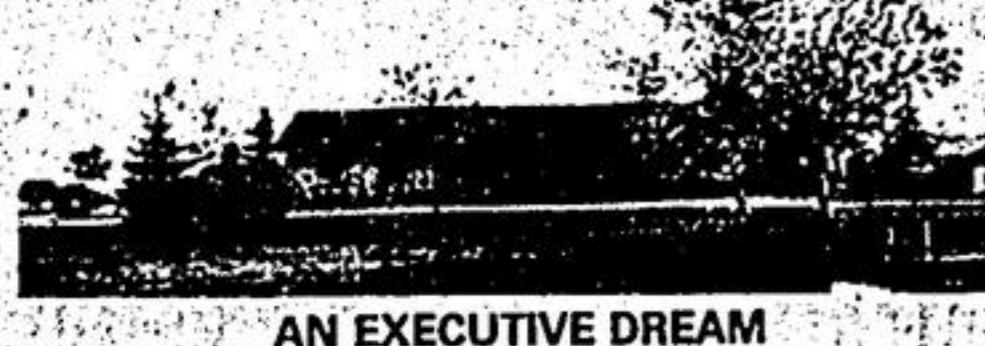
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