

OUT ON A LIMB

‘Composting’

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Gardeners refer to compost as ‘black gold’. What is compost? Compost is completely decayed organic matter. Composting can be very simple or very sophisticated. It can be as easy as creating a pile of leaves, grass or plant clippings, coffee grounds, tea bags, shredded paper, ashes and vegetable kitchen scraps. I bring the coffee grounds home from the office to add to the compost pile and we have the most wide awake worms in our neighborhood. Our kitchen garbage does not have as much odor since we have been taking the scraps to the compost heap. We save our vegetable waste in a pale that is lined with a biodegradable plastic bag. When the pale is full, we throw the bag in a compost barrel on the deck. Avoid plants and weeds that have gone to seed as your pile may not heat up enough to kill the seed. One year, after topdressing my plant beds with compost, I had tomato plants to spring up in several places.

It is important to have the right balance of ingredients to ensure that the pile heats up enough to break down the brown (carbon) and green (nitrogenous) materials. The optimum balance is 30 parts (brown) carbon to 1 part (green) nitrogen. Most piles don’t have this mixture however, if we know the approximate C:N ratio, we can combine them so that the total mix will be as close to that as possible.

If possible, locate your heap in a sunny location. You don’t even have to turn the pile. Just wait and let nature take its course. This is called a ‘cold pile’. If you want to speed up the process then you need to turn the pile at least once a week and add moisture during dry periods. You can go from a simple pile to compost bins that you still need to turn, compost tumblers that you can roll to aerate or to composting barrels where you just turn the handle to rotate the waste in the barrel. Some people don’t have a place for a compost pile or heap. The bins, tumblers or barrels are the way to go when you don’t have a place that is visually suitable.

You can also ‘sheet compost’. Works well for a vegetable garden. In the fall of the year, lay the organic material on top of the ground in a sheet and till it into the top layer of soil. By spring it should be composted.

I invested in a chipper/shredder so I could reduce the particle size and further speed up the process. I use everything. I don’t take anything to the street. I have two bins, one for material to be composted and the other for material that is in the composting process. I don’t turn the pile as often as I should but the process goes on regardless. It is amazing how the large pile to be composted is reduced by shredding and how it further ‘cooks’ down as it composts.

If you have the space, consider growing a patch of comfrey. I am told that Comfrey leaves have a high level of nitrogen making them a great activator for compost piles. It grows in full sun to near full shade in an area with a lot of moisture. Cut flower stalks and add them to the compost heap. By the second year, you should be able to get 3-4 cuts. This will super-charge your compost pile.

I use the finished product in the spring as a top dressing for my existing plantings. I also incorporate it into the soil for new plantings to improve the texture of the soil and to provide needed organic matter. In addition, I make compost tea by adding water to compost in a gallon bucket for watering our house plants.

Worm composting, known as vermiculture, is a good composting method and children love it. It can be done indoors or out. Worm compost is made in a container filled with moistened bedding (often shredded newspaper, or shredded fall leaves and a handful of sand or soil) and red wigglers. Add food waste and the worms and micro-organisms will eventually convert the entire contents into rich compost. Worms are also invaluable in providing aeration the way nature intended.

Why compost. Because it is the right thing to do.