



COMPOSTING

Organic matter is essential to most healthy growing plants. Suburbanites and city dwellers often find this material difficult to obtain when needed. Yet, each year homeowners dispose of large quantities of organic materials which could be converted into good garden humus.

The history of composting dates back to the beginning of settled agriculture. With many variations, it is accomplished by combining organic materials, such as manure, with soil and allowing the material to decompose over a period of time. Recent increased interest in gardening has brought about a greater need for information on this ancient practice.

Composting is the process of converting "raw" organic materials into humus through decomposition. Farmers are composting organic materials when crop residues or cover crops are plowed into the soil. Homeowners are composting organic materials when they till the soil to prepare their flowerbeds or vegetable garden plots.

USES OF COMPOST

Compost has many uses around the home property. It may be used for topdressing lawns, mulching flower beds, or incorporating into hot beds, cold frames, and potting soil. Humus is the stable end product of decomposition of compost. This is the valuable organic fraction of the soil, comprising 1-5 percent by volume, which helps to increase the soil's ability to absorb and retain moisture; promotes beneficial bacterial activity; produces a stronger soil structure which allows for better air circulation, ease of tilling, and ease of penetration of roots of young plants; adds plant nutrients, including trace elements, to the soil; increases nutrient and water holding capacity, especially in sandy soils; curtails the leaching of nutrients; and increases the steady availability of some plant nutrients that otherwise might be fixed or unavailable.

COMPOST MATERIALS

Almost any organic material may be used for composting. However, care should be taken not to use materials that are infested with insects or diseases or that were treated with pesticides. Disease and insect-infested material should be burned, after which the ashes may be added to the compost. Avoid large limbs, branches or other pieces of wood because they do not decompose rapidly. Twigs and branches over one inch in diameter should be cut or ground up before placing in the compost heap.

Kitchen scraps are excellent for small compost piles, but do not use meat scraps.

Lawn and garden clippings can produce a clean, nutrient-rich compost if they are handled properly. Compost piles made of lawn clippings or tree leaves should be turned frequently to prevent them from compacting and producing a slimy, yellowish-brown smelly mess. They require nitrogen for decomposition, so sprinkle it on the pile liberally.

Garden refuse may be added to a compost pile, but generally this material is turned under when the soil is prepared for another planting. Leaves are only available in the fall in sufficient quantities to begin a compost pile of any size. Some leaves, such as oak and pine needles, will produce an acid reaction when combined with soil; others such as locust and maple leaves will produce an alkaline reaction. Leaves, like

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