

Extension Notes

Personal Column for August 16, 2010

By Gary Hall, ISU Regional Extension Education Director

Turn Leaves into Compost

Leaves are falling from the giant cottonwood tree we share with our neighbors. Those leaves gave me the idea to remind you to not ignore those leaves. Instead of looking at them as a nuisance consider turning them into nutrient-rich compost that can be used in your garden next spring.

Compost is a mixture of decomposed plant materials and other organic waste that can help sandy soils retain more water, improve the aeration of clay soils and provide plant nutrients. Composting is a great way to recycle garden waste and reduce the money spent on store-bought fertilizer. Decomposition can take one month to two years, depending on how actively the pile is managed.

Yard waste like leaves, grass clippings and plant trimmings can be composted, as well as kitchen waste like vegetable scraps, coffee grounds and egg scraps. Meat, bones, grease, eggs and dairy products should not be composted because they can attract rodents. Do not add diseased weeds or plants either. Branches and twigs larger than one-quarter inch in diameter should be put through a shredder or chipper before composting.

Compost piles can be made using a variety of structures, but the pile must be large enough to hold heat and small enough to admit air to its center. Ideally, each pile should be 3 to 5 feet tall and wide.

To build a compost pile, set 4 to 6 inches of chopped brush or coarse material over the soil. This allows air to circulate underneath the pile. Add a three to four inch layer of damp, low-carbon (green colored) organic material, such as grass clippings, on top. Follow this with a 4 to 6 inch layer of high-carbon (brown colored) organic material. Both of these layers should be damp, so add water if necessary. Finally, add a 1-inch layer of garden soil or finished compost. This last layer introduces the microorganisms needed to break down the organic matter. Mix these layers together and then add more materials to the pile in additional layers.

For the quickest decomposition, remix the pile about once a week. Move materials previously on the top and sides of the pile to the center. Add water as needed to keep the pile damp. The temperature will quickly reach more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit, but the pile will eventually cool off and decrease to about one-third of its original volume. The compost will be dark, crumbly and earthy smelling.

Passive compost piles can be allowed to sit undisturbed and will decompose slowly. Additional materials can be added to the top as needed. Completed compost may be removed from the bottom of the pile and used even if the rest of the pile is not completely decomposed.

When mixing compost in with soil, 10 percent compost is considered the minimum, 30 percent the optimum and 50 percent the maximum. You will have a garden that will thank you with fresh produce you, your neighbors and friends can all enjoy.

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