

**INSIDE GRUNDY COUNTY**  
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Don't know what to do with your lawn clippings, weeds, or other plant materials? Why not compost. Composting is a way of reducing yard waste. Compost is decomposed plant material mixed with soil and can be used to improve soil properties. Now that the weather has warmed up and the lawns, gardens, trees, shrubs and flowers are growing quickly, it is time to think about what to do with the yard waste that will be produced by all this plant growth. Yard waste can be composted and turned into a useful product that can be used in the garden, lawn or flower beds. This column will review composting dos and don'ts and help you decide if this is something you want to try.

What can you put into a compost pile? Leaves, fresh grass clippings, weeds that have not gone to seed, shredded paper, hedge clippings, cornstalks, crushed corncobs and sawdust are common materials used in compost. Fresh lawn clippings, weeds and alfalfa have a low carbon to nitrogen ratio. Leaves, shredded paper, hedge clippings, cornstalks, crushed corncobs and sawdust have a high carbon to nitrogen ratio. Therefore the compost pile will work best when there is a mix of these different materials in the compost (for a compost pile to work effectively it must have a 10:1 carbon to nitrogen ratio). Apple cores and banana peels can be placed in the compost as well but should be covered to limit the attraction of flies.

You do not want to put meat scraps or bones into the pile as they are likely to attract dogs, rodents or other animals. Also, don't put in diseased plant materials, pet excrement or weeds that have gone to seed as the seed and pathogens will not likely be destroyed by the composting process.

To speed up the decomposition rate, you may want to try the following: chop or shred the materials to be composted; add a high-nitrogen, complete analysis fertilizer to the pile; incorporate barnyard manure into the pile; and turn the compost about once a week during the season, adding some water each time (the composting material should feel like a damp sponge-a drop or two of water should drop out when tightly squeezed). Using all these techniques will hasten the decomposition rate. Decomposition rate is affected by the type of material used, size of particles and amount of moisture and oxygen present.

The benefit to using compost is that it will increase the amount of organic matter in the soil, therefore enhancing the soil tilth of flower and vegetable gardens. Building up organic matter increases both its water holding capacity and its productive ability thus enabling the plants to better tolerate droughts.

To learn more about composting for the home garden, contact the Grundy office of ISU Extension at 319-824-6979. Have a great summer!