

“Home Cents®” Help Tips

Compost: A Healthy Treat for Your Garden

If you'd like to give your garden a healthy treat this summer and fall, why not consider starting a compost heap in your backyard? Made up of organic materials like food scraps and yard wastes, compost provides you with a rich, natural soil conditioner which is very easy and inexpensive to make.

Composting is not only good for the garden; it's good for the environment. Roughly one-third of household waste is made up of organic material which can be composted. By diverting kitchen scraps and lawn and garden clippings from your regular household waste stream, you can make a significant reduction in the amount of garbage going to local landfill sites.

Composting is also a good way to teach youngsters about the environment. Since you can compost throughout the winter, it's a great year-round project for the whole family.

How it Works

A rich, dark, soil-like material, compost is formed when microscopic bacteria which live in soil and wastes begin to eat away at organic matter, causing the compost pile to heat up. Once enough heat is generated, the wastes start to break down.

The amount of time it takes for compost to form depends on what's in the pile and how regularly it's turned. It's very important to keep the pile moist, but not wet.

The material should be turned every two or three weeks or when it becomes compacted or develops an odor.

Compost Material

Things you can compost include leaves, wood ash from fireplaces or woodstoves, coffee grounds, tea bags, nut and egg shells, lawn and garden clippings, fruit and vegetable wastes and leaves.

Be sure not to put in materials like pet wastes, charcoal or coal ashes, dairy products, fats, oils or oily foods, meats, bones or fat. It's also a good idea to steer clear of throwing mature weeds in your compost pile because they could contaminate the compost and, eventually, your soil.

Your compost heap can be as simple as a small, three-sided bin, or as fancy as a covered, multiple-bin unit. You can make your own composter quite easily with some lumber or a plastic garbage container with holes punched in it.

The next time you're in your local hardware store, take a look at commercially sold units to get a good idea of how they're built. If you're not a handy person, it may be more convenient to purchase

one of these ready-made units instead of constructing your own.

Getting Started

To start with, make sure you place your compost bin in a well-drained area of your property. When starting your compost heap, put down a layer of kitchen and yard wastes first, then add some soil, along with some commercial compost or manure to give the process a little extra help in getting started. Once these initial layers are formed, continue to add organic material, along with shovelfuls of soil.

Be sure to turn the pile so that everything decomposes. Turning the pile on a regular basis ensures that air is circulating, and that the pile is not overly moist or dry. You can avoid compost odors by always covering wastes with a layer of soil about one inch in thickness. Experts also suggest that no layer of material exceed a depth of four to six inches.

Also keep in mind that it takes longer for large pieces of material in a compost heap to break down. Try to restrict pieces of waste to one inch or less in size; these are ideal.

When your compost is ready to be used, it will be crumbly and soil-like in appearance. You may want to use a screen to sift out any large pieces of material which haven't fully decayed.

Applications

Compost can be used to prepare garden beds before planting. It can also be used around trees and shrubs. As well, you can make a nutrient-rich solution for your garden plants out of compost and water.

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