

Composting

by Ursula Nanna, Bell County Master Gardener

Seasons come and go, but fall is Nature's way of replenishing the soil around plants and trees. As the leaves fall and break down, they become a nutritious food source for the plants and trees the following spring. The soil becomes sweet smelling, easily workable, and a wonderful place for beneficial organisms to grow. The process of breaking down organic matter in the garden is referred to as "Composting".

Composting is Mother Nature's way of recycling the natural nutrients in organic waste into useable nutrition for all plants. Composting requires only organic materials, sun, moisture, air, and time. Nature provides the microbes needed to help break down the materials.

Yard waste, such as leaves, disease-free garden plants, grass clippings, and kitchen scraps such as vegetable peels, egg shells, coffee grounds including the filter paper, and tea bags are all compostable materials.

It is important to avoid adding cooking oils, meat products, fatty foods, and human or animal waste and bones to your compost pile. Adding these to your compost may attract unwanted pests or cause problems like bad to your yard.

Organic matter mixed with the soil will add nutrients and improve the composition of the soil. In areas like Central Texas, where clay is dominant, the organic material will help create looser, more workable soil. In sandy soil, the same material will improve the water-holding capacity. No matter what kind of soil you have, composting will be beneficial to it.

.So how do I compost?. you may ask yourself. .What fancy tools and equipment will I need to buy?. The answer is none. Gardeners may choose black plastic bags for composting, or one of the many composting bins on the market, or simply pick an out of the way spot in the back yard and start a pile of stuff. Create a boundary of some sort to contain your site, like logs or concrete blocks

To get you started, here are some composting tips: Choose a level site for your compost pile, one convenient to the house and yard chores; collect all your organic material; start small, layer your materials; and as the material permits, keep adding to the pile. Keep the pile moistened, but not wet! Use the lawn mower to chop up leaves before adding them to the pile. And for best results, include a mixture of green materials such as grass clippings, and brown material such as leaves; Turn the pile every few weeks with a pitchfork so the pile stays aerated.

Don't be over eager or impatient, turning too frequently inhibits the break down of organic materials. The time it takes to create a finished pile pf compost will vary depending on the materials, moisture, and outside temperature, but as all gardeners know, nothing happens overnight, but eventually it will happen.

The compost is ready when it smells like earth, the organic material used is not identifiable, and it looks dark and crumbly. Don't rush the process, because "hot" compost can burn plants. So let it "cook" and cool thoroughly.

Once you give composting a chance, you'll be amazed at the difference it makes when added to your plant and flower beds. You'll have stronger, healthier plants and more blooms than ever. Shrubs will be fuller and richer in their natural color. Also, composting is good physical exercise as you turn your pile and enjoy being outside. Finally, not adding to landfills is beneficial to all of us and our communities. So start composting and enjoy the benefits!