

Compost: Trash to Garden Treasure

Late spring and summer are good times to convert garden, yard and kitchen debris into soil-enriching compost. Much of the “trash” that we throw away can be used to make our gardens more productive, which means more fresh produce to enjoy.

Composting is no more difficult than traditional ways of dealing with trash. It just takes some modification of our habits.

Many materials can be used to produce good compost - basically, organic matter. Organic matter simply refers to material that at one time was living. Grass clippings, leaves, egg shells, coffee grounds, tea bags, vegetable and fruit clippings, shredded paper and chopped brush are a few examples of organic matter suitable for composting. Cheese, meat scraps, fats or bones should be avoided due to the potential of attracting pests like rodents. Also, these materials are slower to decompose and may create an odor problem.

The size of a compost bin may vary but you'll need to construct an enclosure at least 3 feet by 3 feet by 3 feet. It can be made from almost anything: wire, wood pallets, cement blocks, etc. One side of the bin should be either open or removable for ease of adding and removing materials from the bin.

The simplest compost bin that I use and am happy with is a wire hoop made from welded fence wire. The piece of fence wire should be long enough to make a 3-foot diameter hoop. This hoop bin is sturdy enough to stand upright on its own with no additional support.

The beneficial bacteria and fungi use nitrogen in the process of breaking down organic materials. To provide the nitrogen add ½ cup ammonium nitrate per bushel of organic material added to the compost pile. One suggestion is to alternate 8 to 12 inches of organic matter, 2 inches of topsoil or compost and 1 cup of any complete fertilizer (per layer) until the container is full. Then add enough water to get the material to the consistency of a wet sponge.

The microorganisms in your compost pile also must have air to live. Frequent turning with a shovel or pitchfork will benefit the bacteria and fungi, resulting in faster decomposition of the organic materials. Using the wire hoop mentioned above makes turning the pile easy. Simply pick up the wire hoop and set it to the side of your pile of compost. Next, use a pitchfork or shovel to place the compost materials back into the wire hoop in its new location. Also, keep in mind that if the material is chopped or shredded, the faster it is composed.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, May 28, 2009