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Composting and Soil Improvements

By David Selman, Tracker-Outdoors.com

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Composting provides a great natural resource!

Where we live, the soil is black clay (north Texas). We have found that by using a compost, we can almost eliminate the need for commercial fertilizers to grow most vegetables, herbs and spices.

Our compost is lined with rail-road ties (4 tall) but is open on one side for easy access. We put hay, table scraps, garden scraps, firewood ash, and manure from our cattle and horses in it. The materials in the compost are "turned" from time to time. The soil from the compost is great for starting new plants of all kinds as well as being tilled into the soil of the garden. This organically rich soil helps make the black clay much easier to work and provides nutrients for the vegetables. Neighbors barns and livestock auction houses are great resources for manure. Composting provides an environmentally safe way to transform biodegradable waste products into rich and fertile soil.

For those of you who suffer from a high concentration of clay in your soil, composting is the answer. Composting will supply your garden with a continual source of rich humus that will loosen up clay based (heavy) soils, allowing the roots of flowers and vegetables to penetrate the soil. For folks with sandy soils, compost will perform the opposite function: it will bring soil particles together and help retain water for plants to use, while still allowing the soil to "breathe."

A few of the best composting materials include leaves, shredded newspaper, grass clippings, farm manure, garden waste, sawdust and vegetable peelings.

Household biodegradable refuse is not recommended because it's messy and attracts insects & rodents. These are items you deffinatly don't want to use; bones, meat scraps, cat or dog manure, grease, diseased plants or walnut leaves. There are several companies that manufacture composting bins. Another option is to use scrap lumber, railroad ties or wood pallets. Make sure whatever you build is well ventilated to allow for the free movement of moisture and air, which will aid in the breakdown process. I use three wood pallets which I stand at right angles to each other. I tie these together to hold them in place. This makes it easy to access the compost, which needs to be periodically turned to aid in the breakdown stage.

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Compost is a dark-colored, loose mixture of well-rotted organic matter that can be used by the gardener to improve garden or potting soil. Any organic matter such as garden waste is a good ingredient for compost.

If soil is hard and crusty when dry or sticky when wet, vegetables do not grow properly. Good garden soil is loose, has high water-holding capacity and proper drainage. Put your compost pile in a well-drained area. A shady spot or a place behind bushes will shield the heap from view.

It is possible to accumulate materials in a loose pile but it is better to have an enclosure for the compost. This could be a pit dug 18 inches into the ground of any length and width or an above-ground structure. Either type of structure should be divided with a partition. One side can be used for composting material and the other for usable compost.

A rectangular pile 2 to 5 feet wide, 5 to 10 feet long and 2 to 4 feet high is adequate for most households. If space is not available, a single, tall pile can be used. Fresh material is added at the top and finished compost dug out at the bottom.

Build your compost pile in layers. First add 6 to 8 inches of garden refuse. Each layer of this organic material should be moistened. A little lime also may be added to help the process and keep new soil from packing. Add 1 to 2 inches of soil. Repeat this process as composting material is available.

The top layer should be lower in the center to help collect moisture. Water may have to be added during dry weather to keep the pile going. Compost materials should be moist but not saturated.

Turn the pile with a garden fork a couple of times a month to hasten composting. In about a month the pile should be hot in the center indicating it is decomposing properly. If this doesn't happen, the pile may be too wet or too small. Fertilizer or more frequent turnings could be needed.

A well-maintained, active pile will not attract rodents. When adding food scraps, bury them in the center of the pile.

Soil that is ready for use from a compost is dark, loose and has an "earthy" smell. Most organic materials should compost in 4-8 months.

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Composting

By Alasdair Meldrum

What is composting? Composting is a natural process which can mean different things to different people. The term 'composting' is used to describe a wide range of activities, from a heap of manure at

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the bottom of a garden to sophisticated treatment processes for commercial wastes and is designed to reduce the quantity of organic waste sent to landfills.

Community composting sites tend to be relatively small. A typical site may process up to 200 tonnes of material a year. Commercial sites, where composting is specifically a business activity, or local authority sites set up to divert biodegradable material from landfill are much larger. With some of the larger sites processing tens of thousands of tonnes each year, materials handling equipment and systems become a necessity.

The purity of the product is very important and is graded according to its organic purity. Glass is the main product that needs to be eliminated to produce a compost that is pure enough for sale. This has caused a few problems with some main commercial composting facilities therefore rendering the compost to be used for capping material until a solution can be found.

But put simply, the microbes break down large molecules into smaller ones that they can use as food. This releases heat energy, water and carbon dioxide during the breakdown as by-products and it is this heat that causes the temperature to rise, which is why compost heaps are often warm and steamy. Here are 5 reasons why everyone should consider composting:

1. Composting reduces the environmental impact of having to incinerate organic waste.
2. Organic material can form up to 1/3 of our weekly waste. Without composting, this goes straight to landfill. Composting minimises our landfill waste and recycles it back into our gardens.
3. Organic waste which is dumped in landfill rather than composted stagnates and produces methane and toxic run-off which contaminates soil and groundwater.
4. Composting can successfully be carried out at any level, from multi-acre commercial or municipal windrows to simple backyard bins.
5. Composting is fun, easy and very satisfying.

Composting is a fun and environmentally-friendly activity. It's something anyone can do to make a positive contribution to helping the environment.

Albion Environmental Ltd can advise if you have any composting problems. We have experience in helping our clients achieving PAS100:2005 status.

Alasdair Meldrum is founder and director of Albion Environmental Ltd. Specialising in providing training and consultancy services to the waste management and environment industry across the UK.



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