



Fall will be here before we know it. Many things change as we get closer to autumn. The leaves begin to change, the gardens are finishing production, the landscape is getting ready to be put to bed for the season, and the compost pile continues to grow. Compost pile?

Compost is created from the leftovers in your landscape. Leaves, small twigs, and grass clippings can all be gathered together in the fall and turned into a high quality material than can be used in several different ways.

Composting garden waste not only helps the environment, but also your wallet. Composting garden waste and leaves allows nature to do the hard work in a simple, inexpensive way, and keeps you from hauling away the materials to the landfill. A well-made compost heap creates an environment where decay causing bacteria live and reproduce to convert manure, leaves, and grass into dark, rich humus. During the composting process, the carbon in the plant material is broken down, which produces heat. Temperatures in a pile can reach 160 degrees Fahrenheit. If properly maintained, the high temperatures can kill weed seeds and other undesirables found within the pile without much smell.

There are rules for the materials that go into a compost pile. Leaves, grass clippings, straw and non-woody plant material are all great additions to the pile. Branches, logs, and twigs that are larger than ¼" can be included, but the must be shredded or cut into smaller pieces first to help in the decomposition process. Kitchen waste like vegetable scrapes, coffee grounds, and eggshells are other ingredients that can be included in the compost pile. Materials like pet feces, meat, bones, grease, whole eggs, and dairy products are some items that should be kept out of the pile. These materials can cause a health threat or attract unwanted visiting wildlife.

To have a properly working compost pile, it needs to be the right size. The pile should be large enough to hold heat, but yet small enough to allow good air circulation to its center. Generally a compost pile should be at least 3' tall, 3' wide, and 3' long in order to hold enough heat. The height and width should be no more than 5' to allow air to circulate to the center of the pile.

Layering is a key component in building a compost pile. Before building, put base layer of 4-6" of chopped brush or other course material over the soil in the area you be placing the pile. This will help with the air circulation under the pile. On top of that, put a 3-4" layer of low carbon organic matter, green material like grass clippings. Follow that with at 4-6" layer of a high carbon organic matter, brown material like leaves or garden waste. Both layers should be damp to the touch, so add water accordingly. The material should be damp enough that a drop or tow of liquid is released from a handful when squeezed. Finish with a 1" layer of garden soil or finished compost. This will introduce the microorganisms that are needed to break down the organic matter. Before adding more material to the pile, mix all but the base layer together. This will help even the decomposing within the pile. Keep repeating the layering process until you create the desired size of the compost pile.

Compost piles can have as little or as much maintenance as you want to put into it. The lowest maintenance is a 'passive pile,' or a pile that is just left alone. Actively turned piles will keep the conditions right for a quicker breakdown of plant debris. With active piles, the compost is turned about once a week using a pitchfork, mixing the new debris with the old. Piles that are excessively turned will not keep consistent temperatures and the compost will take longer to develop. Also maintain the proper moisture level of about 50%, 1-2 drops squeezed out of the matter.

'Black Gold' or finished compost has many uses. It is dark brown, crumbly, and earth smelling. There still may be some small pieces of leaves or other ingredients that may be visible. The possibilities are endless to what you can do with compost. It can be used to amend soils, as a component in soil mixtures for container, as a topdress fertilizer for the garden, mulch, or even for a compost 'tea'.

There are just as many techniques for making compost as there are uses for it. The key is finding the right way that works for you.

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