

Sheet Composting

Many gardeners have heard of sheet composting, but they may know it by another name – lasagna composting. This is a cold composting method, which requires no turning. It's a great way to convert grass areas into vegetable beds, create new perennial beds, enlarge existing beds and improve the soil in an area, while utilizing organic materials from your home, kitchen or garden.

Since this is a cold composting method, it takes longer for materials to break down than a hot compost pile. Usually 6 months or more are required before the materials are fully decomposed and ready for planting, so plan ahead. Fall is a great time to create a sheet composting bed, but it can be created any time of year.



What Can I Compost?

Start by assembling your materials. You'll need both high nitrogen and high carbon materials. High nitrogen materials include green leaves, green grass clippings, kitchen waste like fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, alfalfa hay, soybean or cottonseed meal, blood meal and manure (cow, horse, and poultry).

High carbon materials include dry brown leaves, pine needles, sawdust, wood chips, bark, corn cobs, corn stalks, straw, newspaper, cardboard and wood waste. Branches and twigs larger than one-quarter inch in diameter should be put through a shredder or chipper before composting. Newspaper and cardboard are great to create the first layer of your lasagna compost bed.

Do not compost meat, bones, grease, eggs and dairy products; they can attract wildlife and rodents. Do not add weeds or diseased plants to a sheet compost pile, either. Since this is a cold compost method, there is no heat to kill disease spores or weed seed.

Steps to Creating a Sheet Composting Bed

1. If this is a new bed mow the grass or other vegetation as short as possible. Scalp it down the soil if you can. However, a sheet compost pile can be created on a portion of bare soil if that's what is available.
2. Loosen the underlying soil with a spading fork, to create good water drainage.
3. While you're loosening the soil, also remove any perennial weeds. Dig them out and discard them. The compost pile will not smother or kill them.
4. Cover the area with 4-6 overlapping layers of newspaper or cardboard. Wet the newspaper or cardboard thoroughly.
5. Cover the first layer with 1-inch of high nitrogen material like green grass clippings or manure.
6. Add a 1-inch layer of high carbon material like dry tree leaves, straw, shredded paper or brown grass clippings.
7. Continue alternating with 1-inch layers of high nitrogen materials, followed by high carbon materials until the pile reaches 18-36 inches in height.

Make sure the pile stays moist, but not soaking wet. The pile can be covered with a tarp during rainy periods to keep it from being constantly soaked for a long period. If the pile starts to smell like rotten eggs, that's a good indication it has become too wet. Black plastic sheeting works well for this purpose and also helps to add some heat to the pile. Weigh the sides down to hold it in place.

The bed is finished when all the materials have broken down to the point the original materials are no longer recognizable. It will look and smell like black dirt, and is ready for planting.

For more information on composting:

Garden Compost, Nebraska Extension, <http://go.unl.edu/gardencompost>

For more information on creating a traditional compost pile, plan to attend one of this spring's composting programs, presented by Nebraska Extension and the City of Lincoln Recycling.

- Saturday May 19, 10:00 a.m., at Pioneer's Park Nature Center
- Saturday June 16, 10:00 a.m., at Pioneer's Park Nature Center

Your Suggestions are Welcome!

Is there a lawn and gardening topic you would like to learn more about? Sarah Browning is an Extension Educator with Nebraska Extension and can be contacted by phone 402 441-7180, by mail at 444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln, NE 68528: or by e-mail sarah.browning@unl.edu.



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