

## **Composting—Even in Winter**

**By Kathleen Cue, Nebraska Extension Horticulture Educator**

Whether you are new to composting or an old hand at it, there is a technique that can, or already does, work best for you. My favorite composting adage is one supplied by Roger Swain former host of public television's The Victory Garden: "Throw some green stuff in, throw some brown leaves in, throw in a few handfuls of dirt to activate everything, and you'll get compost!" People into the science of composting like to throw out terms like "the carbon-nitrogen ratio" and "aerobic and anaerobic bacterial decomposition." These are great terms to use, and if you understand them, can be implemented in your composting regime. But I like Roger's approach, mostly because it's simple and I never want to see anyone NOT compost because it's too complicated.

Master Gardener Wally had a novel approach. He would dig a small hole in his flower bed and then empty in his pail of eggshells and coffee grounds. Once the hole was filled, he would cover it with dirt and dig a new hole. This mini-composting approach works well for people who don't have room for a large compost pile and the soil helps mask odors to keep the critters away. When doing this in winter, stockpile a five gallon bucket of soil and pre-dig the holes in the fall. As holes are filled with compostable materials, throw some soil over the top and water everything so it freezes, keeping critter digging to a minimum.

Then there is Master Gardener CJ's approach to composting. CJ sends carrot peels, eggshells and other compostable materials through her food processor, along with a little water, to make a slurry. (Keep in mind that the smaller the composting material, the quicker it decomposes.) This slurry is poured in a bucket, brown leaves are added, a trowel of soil thrown over to let the good bacteria activate the decomposition process, and repeated, layer by layer. Storing the bucket in the garage ensured decomposition was working, even on some pretty cold days. At the end of winter, CJ had compost that was ready to use.

Manure from meat-eating animals should never be added to compost piles as diseases from these animals can transfer to humans. Turning the pile often helps the aerobic bacteria do their job more efficiently, resulting in faster composting.

Gardeners like to call compost "black gold" and rightly so since it improves soil and makes plant roots happy. Burning plant roots with excess nitrogen isn't as much of a worry when using compost, which can happen when using manure. Best of all, composting takes time and effort, but not really much in the way of money, so it is a great way to make your own black gold!