

Lasagna Gardening

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

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Lasagna gardening is not growing plants that are used to make lasagna. It is a method of cold composting where organic materials are layered, like lasagna, on top of a garden site. It is a method used to slowly convert grass to a garden bed, improve soil, and recycle organic matter.

Another name is sheet composting. For example, moistened cardboard may be placed on top of grass to control weeds. On top of this, alternating layers of organic matter are put in place. After six months to a year or even longer, the organic matter decomposes into a medium that can be planted into.

As with all types of composting, sheet composting needs the right proportions of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and water. If there is too much carbon and too little moisture, the material is slow to break down. If there is too much nitrogen or moisture, odors are produced.

Organic material high in carbon includes leaves, cardboard, coffee grounds, corn cobs, shredded paper and wood chips. Materials that provide nitrogen include green plant material like grass clippings, fresh weeds, vegetable scraps, blood meal and manure.

To slowly convert a grassed area to a garden bed without tilling, set the garden boundaries. Within the area, mow grass or other vegetation as short as possible. Loosen the soil beneath the grass with a spading fork to relieve soil compaction and improve drainage. The grass still remains in place.

If there are nasty perennial weeds, like bindweed, these should be removed or controlled with an herbicide like glyphosate. Sheet composting is not likely to smother these persistent weeds.

To help smother the grass and annual weeds, cover the area with cardboard or four to six layers of newspaper, then moisten this material. This layer prevents light from reaching the grass or weed seeds.

The next layer should be at least a one inch layer of a nitrogen source such as manure or grass clippings. On top of this, add an equal to slightly deeper layer of a carbon source like leaves, straw, or bark.

Continue to alternate nitrogen and carbon layers, possibly using another type of organic matter. For example, the next nitrogen layer might be kitchen scraps or fresh weeds that have not gone to seed. Cover with another layer of carbon material like shredded paper or a mix of coffee grounds and saw dust.

Continue adding alternating layers of nitrogen and carbon until reaching a final height of 18 to 36 inches. Slightly moisten each layer but only if it is dry. It is important for the material not to become too wet or odors will result and decomposition will be slowed.

The final layer needs to be a carbon layer. This acts like a blanket to discourage flies from laying eggs on exposed nitrogen material such as vegetable scraps. Do not add kitchen scraps like meat, eggs, oil or grease.

The shorter the pile, the quicker it might break down but this depends on conditions like moisture or oxygen levels within the pile. Tarps may be needed during rainy periods or moisture added during dry periods.

This is a method of inactive or cold composting and so be patient. The material is ready to plant into when it no longer looks like organic material, but more like loose soil.

Source: Oregon State University