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COMPOST TIPS & TRICKS!

Composting is a natural process in which small bacteria and other microbes convert yard waste, such as leaves and grass clippings, into a useful organic soil amendment. Compost has been used for centuries to improve the physical condition of soil and add nutrients needed for plant growth. Incorporating compost into light, sandy soil helps it retain moisture and nutrients, while adding it to heavy soil can improve drainage.

Several conditions have to be met to produce compost efficiently from yard waste. The microbes responsible for decomposition need oxygen, water, and nitrogen. Particle size also affects efficiency—the smaller the waste pieces, the more rapidly they will break down. Conversely, the larger the waste pieces, the slower they will break down. So whatever you can do to break down the pieces beforehand will speed up the process.

TIP #1 – LOCATING YOUR COMPOST PILE

Place your composter or compost pile somewhere that's convenient for you—close to where it will be used, but not so close so that it interferes with yard activities or offends your neighbors. A compost pile works best where it is somewhat protected from drying winds, yet receives partial sunlight to help heat it.

TIP #2 – COMPOSTABLE MATERIAL

Many organic materials besides grass and leaves can be composted: non-woody shrub trimmings or twigs less than 1/4 inch in diameter, faded flowers, weeds, leftover plants, lake plants, straw, coffee grounds and filters, eggshells, hair (untreated), fruit and vegetable scraps, and shredded newspaper (black and white print only).

This organic material (also called green material

by some) should ideally be matched with the same amount of brown material such as woodchips, hay, twigs, wood ashes, dried-out-leaves and dried-out clippings.

The No. 1 Rule of Composting - the smaller the material, the more quickly it will compost! So it pays to run the material through a shredder, or to run your lawn mower over it before composting. Wet leaves take a longer time to decompose, but if they are dried out first, mixed with kitchen waste and then put into the composter, their decomposition will accelerate.

TIP #3 – WHAT CAN'T BE COMPOSTED?

Some things should NOT be composted, including pet feces, meat, bones, grease, whole eggs, and dairy products. Badly diseased or insect-infested plants and weeds that are loaded with seed may not heat up enough to be rendered harmless. Inorganic materials such as plastic, metal, glass, rubber and stone also will not compost.

PILE PREPARATION TRICKS

Your compost pile should be built in layers. For best results, follow these steps:

- ❶ Gather up all of the compostable kitchen waste (green material) you can find.
- ❷ At the bottom of the composter (if it doesn't have a screen) or composter pile, place a layer of twigs or sticks about 3" to 4" high. This will allow air to circulate at the bottom of the pile which will in turn help to prevent odors.
- ❸ Begin by placing 8" to 10" of leaves, grass, or plant trimmings onto the twigs, and then cover with a layer of brown material. The kitchen waste and brown material can be mixed together if desired. Water to the point of being moist, but not soggy.

- ④ Now you're ready to get the pile a cookin'. There are a number of things you can do:
- add a compost starter followed by a nitrogen source (like an inexpensive high nitrogen lawn fertilizer without herbicide);
 - apply a mixture of 1 can of regular (non-diet) cola and 1/4 cup of ammonia in a 20 gallon hose end sprayer to the pile.
- ⑤ Afterwards, sprinkle some soil over top, and repeat Step 4. Soil adds micro-organisms to the compost, which helps speed up decomposition. It also helps to keep away insects and pests. Repeat these layers until the pile reaches the top of the compost bin or 3 to 4 feet in height, watering each time you add new layers.

TIP #4 – CHECKLIST

- ✓ Each time you empty yard and/or kitchen scraps onto the compost pile, you should also add an equal amount of brown material.
- ✓ Turn the pile each time new material is added to ensure proper aeration and prevent odors.
- ✓ The pile should not be too wet or dry—just as moist as a squeezed-out sponge.

TIP #5 – LIMING

If your pile contains large amounts of acidic materials, like pine needles or fruit wastes, you might add lime, but no more than 1 cup per 25 cubic feet of material. Be careful—excessive amounts of lime can lead to a loss of nitrogen from the compost pile.

TIP #6 – PILE MAINTENANCE

An active compost pile will heat up to somewhere between 130-160° F. As the center cools, turn the pile to help speed up decomposition and minimize objectionable odors. You will need to do this once or twice a month. Continue to water your compost pile periodically to keep it moist, but not soggy. You can add a little fresh material when you turn the pile, but generally, you're better off beginning a new pile.

A well-managed compost pile (using finely ground material) will be ready in as little as 4 weeks, while an unattended pile can take 4 months or more to decompose. When finished, your compost pile will be about half its original height, and should have a pleasant, earthy smell.

TIP #7 – USING COMPOST

Besides improving soil structure and fertility, finished compost also:

- controls weeds,
- retains moisture,
- reduces soil erosion,
- suppresses root damaging soil organisms, and
- releases valuable nutrients.

TROUBLESHOOTING TRICKS

INSECTS

Sometimes compost attracts flies. This usually occurs when kitchen scraps are left on top of the pile. You can remedy this by burying the food in the pile, or by adding a layer of soil on top of the pile, and by turning it each time you add more waste.

ODORS

A well aerated compost pile should not smell. If occasional odors do occur, try:

- 1) Adding a layer of soil or a little lime.
- 2) Aerating the pile frequently by turning it over every 2 to 3 days.
- 3) Adding brown material to balance the green material (since odors usually occur from too much kitchen waste and fresh lawn clippings rather than too much brown material).

WET COMPOST PILE

A soggy compost pile often occurs in spring because there is not enough brown material available to add to it. Also, as the kitchen waste added over the winter begins to thaw, the compost pile becomes soggy. You can avoid this by leaving the cover off of the composter and aerating the pile daily. The situation can also be remedied by adding only brown material and NOT adding kitchen waste to the pile until it begins to dry up (this should take 1 to 2 weeks if the pile is aerated daily).

DRY COMPOST PILE

Although this occurs infrequently, sometimes your compost pile can become too dry. This usually occurs because there is too much brown material in it. The pile can be made moist by adding more green material, small amounts of water. ☼