

WHY COMPOST?

If you are a compost virgin, your first reaction to this column may be one of alarm. The subject can seem far too esoteric. There are too many choices.. Look in any garden catalog and you'll run the gamut of compost bins--and prices. I hope to de-mystify the subject and concentrate on the most approachable compost pile--one you can make yourself with very little effort. Unlike the pristine catalog photos, my compost creation may look messy, but hey, this is real life.

The first question is: why should I have a compost pile? There are two very good reasons. First, it gives you a chance to dispose of your garden waste in an ecologically sound manner. Second, it will improve the quality of your garden immeasurably as you begin adding the final result to your soil.

Any day now, your yard will be inundated with leaves. You're going to have lots of garden clippings as you clean up your beds and prune your bushes. You can bag and store everything until the next yard waste pickup, but all those clear plastic bags take up an awful lot of space. Why not put your garden refuse to good use by beginning a compost pile?

Here's what you can include in it: leaves, old sod, manure, lawn clippings, fine wood chips, straw, old hay, plant residues from the vegetable garden and even garbage from the kitchen. Newspaper can be



composted too, if finely shredded and mixed with other compost materials, including nitrogen fertilizer.

There are few things NOT to include in your new compost pile. They are: diseased plants and weeds heavily laden with seeds, grease, fish and meat scraps. Fats are slow to break down, increasing the length of time needed for compost to be ready for use. Avoid using waste from household pets, such as cats and dogs.

Composting happens when the action of microorganisms--bacteria and fungi--takes

place chemically and biologically to break down organic matter. Under optimum conditions, composting material should be kept moist, have oxygen, and be supplied with nitrogen-high fertilizer. The final product--the rich compost you have created-- will improve your soil by binding soil particles together, increasing water-holding capacity. Nitrogen and other nutrients will then become more available to plants, fostering their growth.

Basically, you're trying to create a system within your compost pile that provides uniform moisture and temperature .Build it on open ground or in a bin made of rough boards or stakes or small-mesh wire fencing. I have seen bins made from the large square bags of peat moss placed in a square. Holding bins



are often made with lightweight materials, such as circles of wire fencing or hardware cloth, old wooden pallets wired or tied together, snow fencing, or wire framed in wood so they can be taken apart and moved to another part of your garden when empty. More permanent units can be made by stacking landscape timbers or concrete blocks. The main thing is to allow transfer of air through the sides and back. The sides of any compost pile should not be air-tight, because oxygen is essential for decomposition

Spread plant refuse in layers of 6 to 8 inches deep. Sprinkle a few shovelfuls of soil over each layer, adding a high nitrogen fertilizer, such as a 10-10-10 formula at the rate of 1 cupful per 30-35 square feet. Moisten the material in each layer thoroughly. Your pile should be deep enough for at least four or five layers.



Generally speaking, woody materials take longer to decompose, especially if you have not shredded or chopped them. Within six months to a year, you'll have created black gold. Obviously, the more finished compost will be at the bottom of the pile and can be removed at any time it has "ripened".

WHAT TO DO IN OCTOBER

Plant or transplant deciduous trees after their leaves have fallen.

Plant garlic and shallots for harvest next August.

Sow lawn as long as you are mowing it.

Divide early-flowering perennials now if necessary.

Prune deciduous shrubs after leaves have fallen and they are dormant.

Trim dead and diseased branches from trees and shrubs.

Mulch young trees and shrubs.

Mulch raspberries and strawberries.

Clean up iris foliage.

Bring all houseplants inside.

Continue to plant spring bulbs.

Plant bulbs for indoor forcing.

Store tender bulbs after first frost or when foliage dries up.