

Composting in General

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Composting is a natural form of recycling. Waste from the home and yard can be turned into a soil-like, natural fertilizer for gardens and flowerbeds. Composting is the process that occurs when materials such as leaves, straw, lawn clippings are placed with other natural materials in a prepared pile and then are broken down by a microbial process. Some materials should be avoided because they activate an unfavorable mixture. The process can occur quickly or slowly, depending on the amount of time you spend and the skill you have in working your compost pile. The three elements needed are aeration, moisture and a combination of carbon and nitrogen. An active compost pile will start to produce material in two to six weeks, depending on these three elements interacting in the pile.

Aeration is needed to keep your compost pile working rapidly, so turn the pile once or twice a month. A pile that is not turned will decompose slowly and secrete a bad odor. A well-mixed compost pile will decompose quickly and reach a higher temperature, 120 to 160 degrees, which will destroy grass seeds and pathogens.

Adequate moisture is essential to allow the materials in the pile to decompose effectively. As material is added to the compost pile keep a close watch that it is kept moist. Add water if the pile seems dry when it is turned. Too much water will slow the decomposition rate, so the pile must be kept moist but not wet. The compost pile should never be allowed to dry out completely.

Microbes require nitrogen for metabolism and growth. Materials such as sawdust and straw, which are high in carbon, decompose very slowly. Add organic material high in nitrogen, such as grass clippings, chicken litter and manure, to speed up the process of composting. Commercial fertilizers with high nitrogen content can also be added to speed up decomposition. The air temperature, and the surface area of the pile will affect the temperature of the compost pile and the decomposition process.

There are things that should not be added to the mixture of the compost pile. Adding pet droppings causes a health hazard and should never be done. Do not add meat, bones, grease, dairy products or cooked foods because they attract rodents and flies and cause a bad odor as they decompose. Plant material that is diseased or treated with herbicides or pesticides should not be used.

A compost pile is a valuable aid for the gardener. The time spent in establishing and working the pile will pay great dividends by enriching the soil in your garden and flowerbeds. Select the site carefully, and then keeping a balance of aeration and moisture, use the proper type of carbon and nitrogen materials. The compost pile properly maintained will deliver large amounts of material for a small amount of labor and time.