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FACT SHEET

Compost Turns Leaves into Black Gold

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Wondering what to do with all those once gloriously colored leaves now scattered throughout our yards and waiting to be collected? They are the perfect ingredient to start a compost pile. Composting is the process of hastening the natural decomposition of organic matter, like leaves and food scraps, by providing conditions conducive to decay.

There is no magical formula for making compost. The decomposition of organic matter is an integral part of the natural world and will happen with or without your help. Even garden and yard wastes simply piled in a corner will eventually breakdown and provide you with an excellent soil amendment.

If you decide to compost, start by choosing a site for the pile. A major consideration is convenience. Let's face it, a pile situated out in the back forty is more likely to be ignored than the one placed closer to the garden or the house. Contain it with wood, fencing, cinder blocks or other materials on hand for a more attractive look, and also to keep your organic additions from blowing in the wind. Partially shaded locations will keep the pile from drying out as quickly but a nearby source of water is handy during prolonged dry spells.

What to put into your compost pile? Almost any organic material can be added to the pile – leaves, grass clippings, kitchen wastes, shredded newspapers, eggshells, coffee grounds and tea bags, hedge trimming, plain cardboard and so on. When you are adding these materials, take into account the proportion of 'brown stuff'

that is high in carbon like fallen leaves or wood shavings to ‘green stuff’ which is high in nitrogen, for example, grass clippings or kitchen wastes.

Ideally, you might want to create a pile that has about 30 times more brown stuff than green stuff which is pretty easy to make or care for at this time of year. Too much material high in carbon will slow down the decay process. You can either be patient and wait to let nature take its course or give your pile some green stuff or add 3 to 3 cups of a high nitrogen organic or synthetic source of nitrogen to the pile to speed things up.

Faster composting also requires oxygen, introduced into the pile each time you turn it. The water added to dry materials as they are incorporated or during dry spells is also an essential component to ideal composting conditions.

For ‘hot’ composting to occur, your pile needs to be a minimum of 4 feet by 4 feet by 4 feet. One recipe for compost is 6 inches of leaves, 2 inches of kitchen wastes, grass clippings or manure and a shovelful of soil. Repeat until the pile is 4 feet high. Once made, give the pile a thorough mixing. If conditions of green to brown, temperature and moisture are right, the pile will heat up to 140 degrees F in 3 to 5 days. Serious composters may want to purchase a long-stemmed thermometer to monitor temperatures. Turn when the temperatures drop below 100 degrees F.

Compost is ready to use when it is dark and crumbly and the organic materials that were decomposed are no longer recognizable. This may take 8 weeks to 1 year. Composts made with animal manures tend to be higher in nutrients than leaf and food waste based ones. Regular applications of an inch or so of compost to garden beds may eliminate the need to add other sources of nutrients. A soil test can confirm whether fertilizer is needed or not.

The UConn Soil Nutrient Analysis Lab (www.soiltest.uconn.edu) recommends putting sources of compost down at least a month before sending soil samples for testing. Follow the directions for collecting samples. Finished compost can be mixed into the soil before planting, used as a mulch in some instances such as in the vegetable garden, or to make compost tea. Depending on how it is made, compost tea may have some nutritional or disease suppressant qualities.

Composting is much easier and cleaner than many homeowners suspect. There are a number of good books on composting that you might want to read through when deciding what type of compost system would suit your needs. Once you see the benefits of adding compost to your garden beds, you’ll realize what a valuable resource both leaves and garden wastes can be.

If you have questions about composting or on any home & garden questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.ladybug.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.