

Coast and Compost: Composting Made Easy for the Lazy Gardener by Kathy Nunes

My original purpose in writing this article was to make folks aware that composting isn't complicated, expensive or space consuming. Since I can be lazy about chores, I set out to prove, months ago, that compost is a no-brainer.

Instead of spending money on a compost bin, I started a loose compost pile in my fenced vegetable garden. Frankly, it isn't going as well as I hoped. So here's a review of the process and a few of the lessons I learned.

What's the big deal about compost??? It increases the water-holding capacity of soil and provides a buffet of plant nutrients and beneficial microbes. The organic matter stimulates healthy root development and "de-compacts" heavy clay. With just a little help from us, nature recycles the earth's material and decreases our volume of waste. I found it intriguing to watch my kitchen scraps "disappear."

Many have heard the phrases "compost happens" or "let it rot." It's absolutely true! When you leave certain organic materials alone, they will eventually decompose into wonderful soil amendment. It's just a matter of how long it takes.

If you are lax (and forgetful) like me and can be patient, you can throw together a pile of green and brown material, toss it around once in a while, water it and wait for the magic to happen. It may take a year that way.

But if you are one of those people who are willing to put in a little more work by turning the pile more frequently, the decomposing happens faster. Either way, the process and recipe to create compost is the same. There has to be a proper balance of food (greens and browns), air and water. Here's the quick and dirty method I use:

- Pick a sunny location near a water source.
- If the pile is going to be loose or just held together with chicken wire, fence it off to discourage our friendly foothill scavengers (including deer).
- Throw together a pile of "browns" (carbon-rich materials) and "greens" (nitrogen-rich materials) by alternating them in layers like a cake. Try to balance equal amounts of each. The breakdown occurs by microorganisms (soil saprophytes - bacteria and fungi) feeding on decaying matter and decomposing them until compost is created.
- Try to create a pile that is a minimum of 3 to 4 feet cubed in order to retain the heat needed to break down the ingredients. Temperatures of 120 to 160 degrees will kill most weed seeds. Anything over 160 degrees can kill the microorganisms required to develop compost.
- Thoroughly hose down the layers with water. Insert the hose into the center of the pile, not just on top. It should feel like a damp sponge.
- Turn the pile over occasionally to give it air (oxygen). Move the bottom rotted material onto the outside and newer, drier ingredients to the inside of the pile. Air can't circulate in a dense, wet, compacted pile.

Here are some examples of compostable materials you may already have:

- **Green (nitrogen-containing) material:** grass and shrub clippings (chopped small), wilted flowers, raw fruit and vegetable trimmings, hair, coffee grounds, tea bags.
- **Brown (carbon-containing) materials:** pine needles, dry leaves, straw, sawdust, crushed egg shells, shredded paper, coffee filters.

- **Do not compost:** dairy or greasy foods, dirt, ashes, fish, animal products and diseased plants.

OK, here's where I went wrong. My pile didn't "heat up" properly (it still breaks down, but slowly):

- First of all, I didn't always bother to reduce the size of what I threw in. The bigger the pieces (especially browns), the longer it takes to decompose. Shred your ingredients or run the mower over the leaves.
- I didn't watch the size of the pile. It shrinks as it decomposes. Smaller piles don't generate enough heat.
- I also didn't think about watering it often, even though I was right there with a hose! A dry compost pile decomposes very slowly.
- By not turning it more than every few weeks, the process was very slow. In my eyes, there is nothing wrong with this if you are willing to wait for the "black gold" it will create. I can always find better things to do...

So there you have it. Successful composting doesn't have to be complex. Do the no-brainer technique by just throwing it together and waiting patiently. Or get more ambitious by using a bin to accelerate the process, heat it up quickly, and turn the pile over frequently. Let Mother Nature do its magic of chemistry, smell the good stuff, and give yourself a pat on the back when you harvest it!

Kathy Nunes is a 2009 Master Gardener graduate who likes to take shortcuts whenever possible.