



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Composting: How to Beef up on Organic Matter (March 11, 2023)

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Minerals, organic matter, air, and water are the 4 main components of soil. Soil minerals are derived from decomposed rocks. Soil organic matter comes from dead plant and animal residues that are in various stages of decomposition, living soil organisms (earthworms, fungi and bacteria) and the substances they make when they are alive. In different kinds of soils, these four ingredients are present in varying amounts that make the soil either fertile or deficient for plant growth. A "western" soil with ideal moisture content for plant growth is about equally divided between solid materials and pore space on a volume basis, with the pore space equally divided between water-filled and air-filled pores. Most California soils are mineral soils because they have an organic matter content that is less than 10 percent (and often less than 5%) by weight.



Compost is today's gardening buzzword. Wonder why? Because it adds organic matter to the soil, which in time triggers many positive reactions. Adding compost to your soil makes it easier to work, improves root penetration, helps soils absorb water better and drain faster, helps to balance the pH, converts soil nutrients into a form more easily taken up by plants and adds organic matter to the soil. Best of all, it's free! You can make it yourself out of what would have been trash - yard waste and kitchen scraps.

The traditional composting method is just to pile everything in a corner of your yard and leave it for a year to make compost. Easy, but not too practical for those of us with small yards. Another approach to backyard composting can produce finished compost in as little as three weeks. Careful attention to making and turning your compost pile results in hot temperatures that keep the process moving quickly.

Here's the plan for a simple, manageable compost pile, that won't eat up all of your time or your yard.

- 1) Find a sunny out of the way area in your yard that is at least 3' x 6' in size and divide it into two 3' x 3' areas. On one side you create the compost pile and have room to turn it to the other side. Or use 2 bins at least 3'x3'x3'. These can be purchased or homemade and should have removable slats in front to make it easier to work with. Place your bins in a sunny location near a hose.
- 2) Collect a large amount of brown and green material. Green materials are anything moist and succulent like grass, plant clippings or food scraps (coffee grounds are okay but avoid meats, fats, and grease). Brown materials are dried leaves, dead plants, prunings – anything brown and dry, even shredded paper.
- 3) Material will compost best if it is just a few inches in size. You can do this by cutting it up by hand, putting it through a chipper shredder, running over it with a lawnmower or placing it in a trash can and using a weed whacker.
- 4) Layer a few inches of green materials into your bin, then a few inches of brown. You need an equal amount of each. Wet with a hose as you go to achieve the consistency of a wrung out sponge. The pile needs to be 3'x3'x3' to reach the temperature recommended. Cover the top of your pile with a piece of plastic to help keep the heat in.
- 5) Turn your pile into the empty space or bin with a compost fork as often as possible. Only the center of the pile gets really hot, so turning brings more new materials into the center and also allows you to add water as needed. This step really affects how soon your compost will be ready. If you turn the pile once a week, you'll have compost in about 3 months. If you turn it every day, you can have compost in 3 weeks!

And that's all there is to it. Don't add animal wastes, soil, weeds with seeds, wood ashes, or diseased plants to your pile. A well-tended composted pile shouldn't smell bad. If yours does that means it's giving off nitrogen caused by too much green material. Turn it and add some dried leaves. If your pile isn't hot in the beginning, it may not have enough green materials. Turn it and mix in some more grass clippings or fertilizer to heat it up a little. It could also be too dry. Turn it and add more water. To make sure your pile doesn't attract flies, bury all your food waste among brown materials. If you don't turn your pile frequently or chop your pieces so small, you'll still get compost as long as you remember to keep your pile moist.

We all have plenty of grass clippings, dead plants, and fallen leaves so we might as well do something useful with them. Turn your trash into organic matter for the soil or as some people call it "gardener's gold"!

For more information on Composting, attend our FREE seminar on March 18 at the Tulare County Farm & Agricultural Museum at Mooney Grove. (Mooney Grove entrance fee: \$6/car, \$3 for seniors.)

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

Visalia Farmer's Market- Saturdays, 8-11 am, 2100 W. Caldwell Ave (behind Sears)

March 11 - Luis Nursery Plant Clinic, Caldwell & Mariposa, Visalia - 10 am - 2 pm

March 11 - Seminar: Garden Design & Irrigation, Mooney Grove Ag Museum, 1-2 pm

March 18 – Seminar: Composting, Mooney Grove Ag Museum, 1-2 pm

March 18 – Hofman's Nursery Plant Clinic, 12491 W Lacey, Hanford – 10 am – 1 pm

March 25 – Seminar: Plant Selection, Mooney Grove Ag Museum, 1-2 pm

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

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