

Composting is Essential to a Fabulous Garden

by Claudia Steen

Making your own compost is simple and can be fun. You hear a lot of talk about going green. Well, having your own compost pile is as green as it gets. Composting your own yard and kitchen waste reduces the amount of garbage that is sent to the landfill.



Yard waste and vegetable crops make up as much as 20% of household garbage. Composting effectively recycles yard waste into valuable soil amendments.

The compost container is best when it is 3 feet wide, 3 feet long and 3 feet high. There are many options for building your compost container. One method is to use cement blocks piled into the correct size; doors can then be placed on the front to easily get into the pile when the composting process is finished. But other containers may also be used.

There are two types of composting: hot, which is fast and aggressive and cold, which is slow or passive. Hot composting is more labor intensive, providing finished compost in two to three months. The cold method is easy and convenient, resulting in usable compost in about a year.

To build a **hot compost** pile you add a mixture of ‘energy materials’ and ‘bulking agents’. Energy materials are high in nitrogen and moisture, like grass clippings, fruit and vegetable waste, and garden trimmings. We call these the ‘green part’. Bulking agents are low in nitrogen and low in moisture, like straw, hay and sawdust. Middle range materials include shredded tree and shrub trimmings and leaves. These are the ‘brown part’. The best ratio is one-part green layer then two parts brown layer, then sprinkle a shovel full of dirt over the layers which will add the microbes that will help break down the material.

For hot compost, turn the pile once a week and keep it moist. If you have a compost thermometer, stick it in the pile and watch the numbers rise. A nice, hot pile will range from 130 and 150 degrees. If it goes above 150 degrees, pull the pile apart and let it cool down. Assure it is watered periodically.

A **cold compost** pile is prepared the same way, but you leave it to sit and break down naturally and do not need to turn it. Keep in mind that this type of pile does not reach the heat levels needed to kill weed seeds; compost only weeds that have not yet gone to seed. When adding to your pile, pull the pile apart and bury the new waste, such as your kitchen waste, in the middle, then close the pile again.

Never put the following into your compost pile: meat, fats, oils, animal or pet manures, diseased plants, perennial weeds, like quack grass, morning glory or other hard to kill weeds, or vegetation treated with fungicides.

When the pile is ready to harvest, a recommendation is to shovel the contents to a 1" x 1" holed screen placed over a wheel borrow. Push the contents back and forth allowing the smaller



particles to go into the wheelbarrow and any large particles that have not completely composted will remain on top and can be put back into the compost pile. The other thing you can add to your finished compost is to mix in composted steer manure which provides even more nutrients into your soil.

Once you have your compost ready to be added to your soil, work 2-3 inches of compost into a depth of six to eight inches before planting your vegetable garden. Compost may also be used as a side dressing of existing plants; added to planting holes; or added again in the fall after a light frost and before freezing. If you add it in the fall, you do not necessarily need to work it into the soil.

Your vegetable garden soil will thank you for adding to its richness that will be shown in the amazing, healthy vegetables that are produced. If added to your flower beds the nutrients provided in the soil will also encourage healthier plants and more beautiful flowers.

For any gardening questions - you are always welcome to contact our Master Gardener Clinic at 509-574-1604 or email gardener@co.yakima.wa.us.