



Composting has many values:

- Composting is environmentally sound; properly done, it decreases the potential for surface and groundwater contamination.
- Composting destroys disease-causing organisms and fly larvae.
- Once a composting system has been set up, it will not require much labor.
- Compared to other disposal options, composting is not costly.

Backyard Composting

An Alternative Disposal Method

Composting organic waste is a practical and an environmentally sound alternative to landfill disposal. It is economical, odorless and biologically beneficial. **A commitment to proper management of the compost bins is the key to successful composting.**

Composting resolves a disposal problem and produces a valuable product – a humus-like material that has several marketable uses from soil conditioner to horticultural growing medium.

A Natural Process

Disposing of leaves, grass clippings and other garden refuse is often a problem for households, particularly in urban areas where landfill space is a growing concern. This waste can be turned into useful compost with no more effort and less energy and cost than it takes to bag and haul it away.

Controlled composting speeds natural breakdown of organic waste. Raw organic material is converted into compost by the action of microorganisms (fungi and bacteria). During initial stages of composting, soil microbes increase rapidly. As the materials decompose, some kinds of microbes dominate. But as they complete a certain function, these microbes decline while others build up and continue the breakdown.

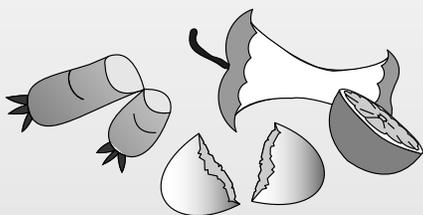
As microbes decompose the organic materials, temperatures within the pile may approach 140 to 160 degrees F at the center. This kills some of the weed seeds and disease organisms in these hot areas. In cooler sections of the pile, however, such sterilization does not occur. Turning the pile is important to complete composting.

Organisms that are responsible for the breakdown of the organic materials require nitrogen to work on the carbon in organic matter. Adding nitrogen fertilizer or materials with significant amounts of nitrogen is often necessary for rapid, thorough decomposition. This is especially true when using old plant material, sawdust or old dry leaves. During the breakdown period, this nitrogen is tied up and not available for plant use. It is released, however, when the composting is complete and the finished compost is returned to the garden.

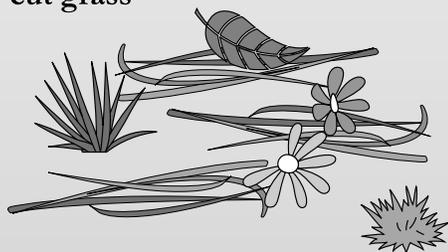
leaves



kitchen waste



cut grass



compost



What Materials May Be Composted?

Most types of yard waste and other organic materials can be used for composting. These include eggshells, sawdust, oak leaves, shredded newspaper, hedge clippings, etc. Some materials, like pinestraw, may be used to a greater advantage as a mulch without composting. Twigs and wood will take a long time.

It is best not to use diseased plants from the flower or vegetable garden for composting if the compost is to be returned to the garden later. Although some diseases are killed by heating during compost formation, some may escape. Unless the compost has gone through a strong heat and is turned frequently and thoroughly and allowed to remain unused for a year, some of these disease organisms may be returned to the garden with the compost, particularly bacterial wilt. If diseases have not been a problem, this precaution may not be necessary.

Avoid composting weeds heavily laden with seeds. Even though many seeds are killed during composting, if the quantity of seeds is extremely high, they may be returned to the garden with the compost and create extra weed problems.

Most organic kitchen garbage may be used in the compost heap, with the exception of grease, fat, meat scraps and bones. These may attract dogs or other animals and may develop an odor during decomposition. Fats and grease break down slowly and greatly increase the length of time required before the compost can be used. Even so, they are composted commercially.

Benefits of Compost

Compost is a dark, crumbly, partially decomposed form of organic matter similar to the organic matter in the soil. In many cases, the compost will serve the same function as peat moss and thus reduce the cost of gardening. Returning these organic materials to the land maintains natural biological cycles and is an ecologically sensible means of recycling organic wastes.

The organic matter in compost makes heavy, clay soils easier to work by binding the soil particles together. This helps improve aeration, root penetration and water infiltration, and it reduces crusting of the soil surface. Additional organic matter also helps sandy soils retain more water and nutrients.

Although compost contains some nutrients, its greatest benefit is in improving soil characteristics. It should be considered a valuable soil amendment, not a fertilizer. In most cases, additional fertilizer will be needed for best growth and production.

Compost is also valuable mulching material to use around garden and landscape plants. Fine compost may be used as a "top-dressing" for lawns and, when mixed with soil, a growing medium for houseplants and seedlings.

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Funding for this publication includes Louisiana
Department of Environmental Quality funds.

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Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service,
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Pub. 2794-L (10M) 4/2000
Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension
work, Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30,
1914, in cooperation with the United States
Department of Agriculture. The Louisiana
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