

Turn yard waste into gardener's gold – compost

By Melinda Myers

Save time and money by turning landscape trimmings into a valuable soil amendment.

The idea is simple, just collect disease- and insect-free plant debris into a heap and let it decompose into a fine, nutrient rich material that helps improve the soil. Don't add meat, dairy, invasive plants, weeds that have gone to seed or perennial weeds that can take root and grow in your compost pile.

Speed things up by layering yard waste with soil or compost, adding a bit of fertilizer to each layer and moistening to a consistency of a damp sponge. Further speed up the process by making the pile at least 3-feet tall and wide.

Turn the pile as time allows, moving the more decomposed materials from the center to the outside of the pile. It's a great work out and speeds up the decomposition. The more effort you put into composting the sooner you have rich organic matter for your garden.



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Build the pile in a location that is convenient for adding raw materials and harvesting the finished compost. Consider placing the pile near a water source to make moistening the pile easier. Avoid poorly drained locations that may lead to the pile of compost becoming waterlogged. Soggy materials break down more slowly and may smell.

Enclose the pile in a bin to keep the process neat and tidy. Purchase a compost bin or make your own from fencing, concrete reinforcement wire or old heat-treated pallets.

Single bin wire composters are easy to assemble and move. Enclosed bins keep materials out of sight and neighbors or less enthusiastic family members happy. Look for bins of sturdy UV resistant materials, ventilation for efficient composting and designed for easy loading and unloading.

Tumbler composters are great for small spaces and make loading, unloading and turning much easier. The closed system also keeps out rodents, wildlife and pets. Add garden waste, keep it consistently moist and give it a turn. Continually adding fresh material slows the process, but you will still end up with good compost. Speed up decomposition with two tumblers. Fill one tumbler with plant waste and let it cook, while collecting fresh materials in the second.

And don't let cold temperatures or a lack of space stop you. Everyone can convert kitchen scraps into nutrient-rich compost with the help of red worms. Convert a plastic container filled with shredded paper into a home for the worms and place to recycle plant based food scraps. Or dress things up with a stylish bin like the green Worm Farm Composter and move the worms indoors for convenient recycling.

Add finished compost to your vegetable and annual gardens every spring to help build healthy soil and a productive and beautiful garden. Or spread a one-inch layer over the soil surface of perennials gardens every year or two to keep your flowers looking their best.

As you clear out the summer garden, put all that green debris to work. Convert it to rich compost for next year's garden. Then enjoy the many benefits it will have on your landscape.

Melinda Myers has more than 30 years of horticulture experience and has written more than 20 gardening books, including "Small Space Gardening". Myers is a columnist and contributing editor for Birds & Blooms magazine and was commissioned by Gardener's Supply Company for her expertise to write this article.