

Home Composting Workshop Bedford Farmers' Market June 14, 2010

Compost Basics

Composting at home is easy to do, diverts material to a useful purpose which you would otherwise be sending to landfills and creates a soil amendment rich in nutrients for your gardens, planters or lawn.

Compost is created by the decomposition of organic materials by microbes. Finished compost improves the structure, water holding capacity and aeration of soils and contains wonderful nutrients for plants. Unlike fertilizers which shock plants with nutrients all at once, compost is like time-release vitamins, slowly releasing food as the plants need it.

Compost is made of sources of both carbon and nitrogen, nitrogen especially important since it is used by the microbes as they decompose the material but also essential for plant growth.

What Can I Compost?

Raw fruit and vegetable scraps

Eggshells

Coffee grounds and unbleached coffee filters

Tea bags (without staples)

Newspaper with soy-based ink (The Boston Globe is okay!), shredded

Unbleached paper towels and napkins

Organically-fed cut flowers, plant material, grass clippings and weeds

Sawdust

Wood ash

Leaves and hay

Avoid: meat, bones, fish, fats, dairy (attract pests), carnivorous pet droppings, plastic bags, chemical pesticides/fertilizers, diseased plants, most colored paper.

The formula

Simply, composting involves mixing “browns” (sources of carbon) and “greens” (sources of nitrogen) in an environment suitable for microbes to thrive and break down the ingredients into the rich, black, soil-like material plants love.

Hot vs. Passive

Passive composting is putting the ingredients together and letting them sit for a long time. You don't really need to do very much except layer a diversity of acceptable materials into your bin of choice. Eventually, compost will result. It should be fairly moist and not slimy. If it seems too dry, water it a little. If it's slimy, add more “browns.”

Hot composting is trickier but results in finished compost more quickly. Keep your bin in a sunny location, moisten when necessary, add lots of material at once, and turn it frequently, using a pitchfork or other method to aerate the pile. Chop or shred larger items like yard waste or newspaper. Compost decomposes fastest between 120 and 160 degrees Fahrenheit. At 135 degrees, weed seeds, human pathogens and most plant pathogens are killed. Over 160 degrees beneficial organisms begin to be killed. You can use a long stemmed turkey thermometer to test.

Finished Product

When finished, compost should be black, crumbly and when you squeeze it, a few drops of water should come out. You can now add it to your gardens or spread it on your lawn! Happy Growing.