Give Backyard Composting a Try!

Many Frederick County residents dutifully bag their yard waste, then place it out for curbside disposal or bring materials to a yard trimming drop-off site. And, according to the EPA, more than 34 million tons of *food waste* is generated in the United States each year. However, there is an alternative to these options that is more efficient, saves fuel and creates a valuable product for your landscape. What is this marvelous process? **Composting!**

Now is the perfect time to try your hand at backyard composting. Many people imagine that it may be a smelly, time consuming or difficult task to master, but this isn't so! Home composting is easy to learn and can be a fun family project, requiring only a small commitment of time. It also rewards with a wonderful byproduct— finished compost, often called "black gold" by gardeners. Although compost can be purchased at a garden center, it can be made at home for free! In addition to these benefits, by composting you are helping to keep biodegradable organics out of the waste disposal stream.

What is composting? Composting is a natural recycling process that turns raw materials (leaves, kitchen scraps, grass, etc.) into a rich, organic soil amendment. Compost happens, on its own, all around us in nature. Beneficial microbes and other organisms are constantly at work decomposing organic matter, transforming "waste" into useable resources. By assisting this natural process, we can speed up the time it takes and develop a system that works neatly in our own back yards.

Why would we want to do this? Because compost is the *ultimate* soil improver! Research shows that adding compost creates better soil structure and increases soil's fertility and water holding capacity. This means that compost-rich gardens are more drought-tolerant, have better drainage and grow healthier, hardier plants. Compost is an excellent top-dressing for your lawn, a key component to building a raised bed and an ideal soil amendment for any vegetable or flower garden. Plus, it's a sustainable, environmentally-friendly way to manage waste while reducing what gets sent to the landfill.

You probably already have everything they need to get started composting: raw materials (such as weeds or kitchen waste), water and a little space. With a little know-how you'll be on your way! A shovel or pitchfork is helpful to turn the pile, but some "low-maintenance" compost systems even skip that step! A compost bin is not necessarily needed; compost can be made in a simple pile. However, some people prefer using a bin for aesthetic reasons or to help keep unwanted pests out of the pile. A bin can also help your pile to retain heat and moisture, which may speed up the decomposition process. The Frederick County Department of Solid Waste Management has easy-to-use bins available for $20, and also has plans available for building your own bin from commonly available materials such as chicken wire, old trashcans or wooden pallets.

The process for composting can be as simple or as complex as you want it to be. The basics are:

1. When placing new materials in your compost pile, always add more carbon-rich, dry materials (such as dried weeds and leaves, straw, twigs, shredded newspapers, paper, napkins, sawdust, etc.) than high nitrogen materials (such as fresh grass clippings, fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, etc.) If you add too many dry carbon materials, the pile will simply compost more slowly. But if you add too much wet, nitrogen-rich "green" stuff, your pile may stink!
2. Don't put meats, fats or oily products in your compost and make sure to cover or bury any food scraps you add to deter critters (dogs, raccoons, and other compost raiders).
3. A pile at least 3 feet wide will hold in moisture and heat better and decompose faster (you can add materials as you go).
4. Add water to create uniform dampness throughout; the material should have the consistency of a wrung out sponge, damp but not sopping wet. A dry pile will not decompose and a soggy one may smell bad.
5. Turning your pile occasionally will aerate the materials and allow them to decompose much faster. It isn't required, it just speeds things up.

And that's about all there is to getting started!

Composting will be complete in 2 to 18 months, depending on the type of materials composted and how often the pile is turned. You'll know it is finished composting when the pile no longer heats up and it has a dark, crumbly texture with a sweet, earthy aroma. Finished compost looks a lot like chunky potting soil. Add the finished compost to your flower or vegetable gardens or use it to lightly top-dress your lawn. You will soon see the benefits of your labor in a beautiful, healthy landscape.

That's the "crash course" in backyard composting! For more complete composting information, **you can sign up for one of our free home composting classes!** To register for a scheduled class, or to request an personalized instructional program on composting for your group or club, or to ask specific questions about your home compost pile, please contact Annmarie Creamer in the Office of Recycling, at *ACreamer@FrederickCountyMD.gov* or by calling 301-600-7405. You can also stop by our offices at 9031 Reichs Ford Road in Frederick to purchase a compost bin, Monday through Friday, 7:30 am-4:30 pm.

HOW TO COMPOST

Composting is the combining and managing of specific waste materials so that they decompose. Once the materials are mixed together, microbes in the soil will start to breakdown the waste and turn it into the nutrient-rich material that helps plants grow. By composting, you are not only creating something that helps keep plants healthy, but you are keeping compostable waste products like food scraps and yard waste out of landfills.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

Brown material to produce carbon:
Dead leaves, branches and twigs, sawdust or wood chips, coffee filters, cotton and wool rags, shredded pieces of paper, cardboard or newspaper and shredded nut shells.

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Green material to produce nitrogen:
Grass clippings and leaves, fruit and vegetable scraps, hair, lint, tea and coffee grounds

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Water

1 Select a dry, shady spot near a water source.

Ideal size for your compost area is 3 feet wide by 3 feet deep by 3 feet tall (1 cubic yard). You can buy a bin, use chicken wire, or just isolate an area of ground for your compost heap.

2 Add brown and green material in alternate layers.

Try and keep the ratio roughly 3 parts browns to 1 part greens. Make sure larger pieces of material are chopped or shredded.

3 Keep the compost moist [but not too wet].

Moisture helps with the breakdown of organic matter.

4 Occasionally turn your compost mixture to provide aeration.

This helps speed up the composting process and keeps things airy, which cuts the risk of things getting smelly.

5 As materials breakdown, the pile will get warm.

There might even be steam. Don't be alarmed. That means it's working. Now you just have to wait.

6 All done!

When material is dark with no remnants of food or waste, your compost is ready. Add it to lawns and gardens or anywhere that could benefit from some good soil.

WHAT NOT TO COMPOST

Metal, glass, and other products that do not easily breakdown, coal or charcoal ash, diseased or insect-ridden plants, black walnut tree leaves and twigs, pet waste, bones, meat, fats, oils dairy products and eggs (egg shells are OK), and yard trimmings treated with chemical pesticides.

What's vermicomposting?

Vermicomposting is a type of composting that uses red wiggler earthworms *(Elsenia fetida)* to break down organic material. Place worms in a container 8-16 inches deep, layered with dirt, newspaper, and leaves. Make sure the bin has small holes at the bottom (a quarter inch or smaller) to allow for ventilation and drainage. Fruit and vegetable waste will eventually be replaced with nutrient-rich excrement. This method requires far less space, so it's a good alternative for people who don't have enough room or the ideal conditions for a large compost pile.

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