

KPOV – *The Point*
Gardening, Get Good at It
“Composting at Home”
October 16, 2018

Gardeners have long made and used compost to improve garden soil. It is organic material that can be added to soil to help plants grow. Food scraps and yard waste together currently make up about 30 percent of what we throw away, and should be composted instead. Making compost keeps these materials out of landfills where they take up space and release methane, a potent greenhouse gas and effectively recycles that waste.

There are many benefits to composting: It enriches soil, helping retain moisture and suppress plant diseases and pests. It reduces the need for chemical fertilizers and encourages the production of beneficial bacteria and fungi that break down organic matter to create humus, a rich nutrient-filled material.

All composting requires three basic ingredients:

- Browns or Bulking agents- This includes materials such as dead leaves, branches, and twigs.
- Greens or Energy Materials - This includes grass clippings, vegetable waste, fruit scraps, and coffee grounds.
- And finally, Water - Having the right amount of water, greens, and browns is important for compost development.

The mixture of ingredients can vary, some say to use an equal amount of browns and greens while others say to use a mixture of one part greens to two parts browns. The brown materials provide carbon for your compost, the green materials provide nitrogen, and the water provides moisture to help break down the organic matter.

You should also alternate layers of organic materials of different-sized particles. Small particles have more surface area for microbial activity and are easier to mix. Grinding, cutting and chopping raw materials reduces particle size. Woody branches that have not been ground often make it difficult to turn a pile. They also decompose very slowly.

There are many different ways to make a compost pile. To begin your compost pile:

- Identify the location: Decide if you want an open pile or an enclosed bin. Select a dry, shady spot near a water source and well drained soil.
- Build and Maintain the pile: Start with a bottom layer of browns or a bin full of dry leaves. As you add kitchen or garden waste to your compost, make sure the larger pieces are chopped or shredded and keep the pile moist, but not wet or dry. Turning occasionally will aerate the pile and hasten the compost process. Try to keep a layer of brown on top.
- Cover the pile.

To make it fast or a hot compost pile:

- Build a pile with a minimum of 1 cubic yard of material to generate heat.
- Don't add to the pile, but keep it moist as a wrung out sponge and turn about once a week.

- The process is complete when the material no longer heats up when turned, about 4-6 weeks.
- Allow the material to age an additional 4-6 weeks before using.

Helpful tools include pitchforks, square-point shovels, and water hoses with a spray head. Regular mixing or turning of the compost and some water will help maintain the compost.

For my own garden, I usually have two compost piles going at the same time. I begin the season by using the pile that has been sitting since the end of last season. I add that material to my garden before I sow any seeds. Then I begin a new pile, adding material to it as available. I continue to add moisture, dry leaves that I've collected in the fall and grass clippings and household vegetable scraps as they become available. You can decide how you would like to begin your compost pile.

For more information on this or any other gardening topic, call the Master Gardeners at 541-548-6088 or go to our website gocomga.com and click on the KPOV tab on the orange bar.

This has been Gardening: Get Good at it on KPOV, The Point.

Resources:

Here are links to sites with more information about composting:

<https://www.epa.gov/recycle/composting-home>

https://vric.ucdavis.edu/pdf/compost_rapidcompost.pdf

<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/techniques/compost-backyard>

OSU Publication:

“Sustainable Gardening: The Oregon-Washington Master Gardener Handbook. Composting — Chapter 5” EM 8742 October 2008