Composting

What is compost? Compost is decomposed organic material, such as leaves, grass clippings, and kitchen waste. It provides many essential nutrients for plant growth and therefore is often used as fertilizer. Compost also improves soil structure so that soil can easily hold the correct amount of moisture and air. Compost improves the texture of both clay soils and sandy soils, making either type rich, moisture-retentive, and loamy.

Benefits: The largest environmental benefit of compost is that it significantly reduces the amount of solid waste produced. The more we compost, the less we contribute to the cost of trash removal and the volume of materials in landfills. Using compost as fertilizer also cuts back on the use of chemical fertilizers, which can run off and contaminate water. Compost decreases the need for costly watering and chemical applications.

What can be composted? Key materials are nitrogen-rich 'greens' and carbon-rich 'browns', water, and air.

Examples of greens are green leaves, coffee grounds, tea bags, plant trimming, fruit (including dropped apples) and vegetable scraps, and grass clippings.

Examples of browns are straw, sawdust from untreated lumber, twigs, and dried grasses, weeds, and leaves.

Water allows microbes in your compost to grow and help decompose material. The compost should be moist.

Air ads in decomposition and controls odors.

A good recipe is 1 part green to 4 parts brown.

What not to compost:

Meat, fish, and animal fats – These materials may attract unwanted visitors to your compost pile.

Shredded newspapers or office paper – The paper likely contains chemicals that are not good for your compost. Recycle them instead.

Ashes from your grill – Wood ashes can be very useful in small quantities, but BBQ grill ashes should NEVER go into your compost pile.

Dog and cat feces – These materials can add diseases to your compost, and they have an unpleasant odor. Use chicken, horse, cow, and rabbit manure instead.

Sawdust from treated lumber - Sometimes lumber is treated with harmful chemicals.

Composting tips:

As soon as decomposition begins, the volume of the pile will decrease. Don't be tempted to add more materials at this point, as this resets the clock on that batch.

You will maximize your composting efforts if you aerate by turning or mixing the heap about once a week. A garden or hay fork works well.

Finished compost is usually less than half the volume of the materials you started with, but it's much denser. When finished it should look, feel and smell like rich, dark soil. You should not be able to recognize any of the items you originally placed in the pile.

Common problems:

If the compost is too wet, turn it more frequently or add dry brown material.

If the pile doesn't heat up, add more green material to the compost, may need to add water, may need to aerate.

If there is an ammonia or rotten egg smell, turn the compost or add brown material to dry it out.

If large amounts of dropped apples or kitchen scraps attract wasps or other unwelcome pests, turn more frequently.

Using finished compost:
Mix compost into the soil to improve it.

Spread compost on your lawn to fill in low spots.

Use as a mulch cover for landscaping and gardening.

Mix compost into pots of potted plants.

See Composting Options: River Keepers' Living Lab, an urban riparian demonstration site, has a rain barrel on –site at 5508 South University Drive South in Fargo.

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March 2010