

Composting Made Easy
by Michelle Curran-Kimball
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The season of yellow-red-orange beauty is here again. With all the stunning glory of maple, oak and liquidambar, we almost forget about the clean-up they demand each fall. There is, however, something very good about all of those leaves: they help make great compost. Most people assume that composting is a difficult task that requires a lot of outdoor space, time, and special ingredients. This myth needs to be dispelled. Anyone can make their own soil conditioner with elements that already exist in the yard and kitchen. In fact, the process of composting is an act of recycling your newspapers and food waste as well as leaves! Much of the soil in El Dorado County is less than ideal, and adding fresh, homemade compost is a cost-effective, natural way to improve it dramatically.

Let's start with the basics. There are two types of composting: "cold" composting, which requires little effort and consists of a simple pile of leaf and other organic debris that stands on its own. It can be anywhere in your yard, any size you want, and will produce good compost over a few month's time. Though this method requires no enclosure, turning the pile occasionally will help speed the process. You can rely on Mother Nature to add moisture to the pile for you, though during hot months it may dry too much. If you want more nutrient-rich fertilizer done faster, you may choose the method of "hot" composting. It is so named because the ingredients included produce a nice, warm environment for worms and other beneficial bugs to live in as they break your wastes down into fertile matter. This method terminates most weed seeds and disease pathogens, and must have air, water, carbon-rich nutrients and nitrogen-rich nutrients in order to work. This, also, is simple:

Just add equal amounts of "brown" matter and "green" matter, things that most of us have at hand already. **Brown matter** includes dry leaves, shredded newspaper and cardboard, straw, sawdust, wood chips and hay, among other things. These components will contribute carbon to the pile. **Green matter** is what adds the necessary nitrogen to the mix, and includes grass clippings, green plant matter, deadheaded flowers, vegetable and fruit rinds, tea bags, coffee grounds, crushed eggshells, and the droppings of only *certain* animals. Steer, cow, horse, poultry, llama, goat, rabbit, hamster and guinea pig are all fine. *Do not* include the wastes of cat, dog, other carnivorous animals, or any plant material that is diseased or has been treated with chemical insecticides. These contain toxins that will negatively affect the chemical balance of your compost pile.

RECIPE IDEA: COMPOST LASAGNA!

Take last night's leftover salad, combine with the eggshells and coffeegrounds from this morning's breakfast, and place in your favorite compost bin. Then layer:

- 6" of leaves you swept off the patio
- 4" of grass clippings (or other plant cuttings-like deadheaded perennials)
- Thin layer of soil to cover

Turn every couple of days, and enjoy fresh compost in just a couple weeks!

You have many choices as to what to use as your pile container for hot composting. There are containers on the market that may be handy for some. Others can construct their own using simple materials. A typical enclosure is 3' by 3' by 3', but can be as big as you like, and can be made out of wood, bricks, cinder blocks, or wire fencing. Be sure to take account of **air circulation** when building your containment. Leave an inch or two of space between side materials. Drill a number of holes through wood slats. Angle cinder blocks so that some of their holes allow air to pass through. A top and bottom are not necessary- just put the ingredients right onto the ground so earthworms and microbes can get up into it, and leave it open so that air and water can enter from above. Some people like to put larger branches at the base of their piles, which allows some air flow from the bottom. **Turn** the materials once in a while to ensure good distribution of elements and add some **water** if it seems dry. Correct moisture content is comparable to the texture of a sponge that has been wrung out.

Don't have yard space? No problem. You can make compost in the kitchen or garage. Just take a bin with a tight lid, add fruit and vegetable rinds, an equal amount of shredded newspaper, a small amount of water, and put a couple earthworms in there. They will make a small, yet potent concentration of compost and a liquid substance called fertilizer "tea" that you can apply in modest amounts to your potted plants. You can also make "compost lasagna" indoors in a small container.

If your attempts at composting haven't worked, perhaps:

- You accidentally added old **meat** scraps
- One of your pets put its **droppings** on the pile
- It **dried out** (usually happens in summertime, slows down decomposition)
- Some of the green plant material you added was treated with **chemicals**
- There is not enough **aeration** (check to see that air holes are not clogged)
- **Bugs** have no access into the pile from underneath
- You haven't **turned** your pile in a long time (going too slowly)
- There aren't enough **nitrogen** sources (also going too slowly)
- There aren't enough **carbon** sources (smells like ammonia)

If you have applied homemade compost to your yard and it doesn't seem right:

Issue: Weeds seem to be coming up where you fertilized that weren't there before.

Possible cause: Certain noxious weed seeds with tough shells made their way into the compost pile. Don't include such plant material as bindweed, quackgrass or oxalis.

Issue: Your compost seems to be burning the plants whose soil it was applied to. (Leaves are browning on their outside edges despite appropriate watering)

Possible Cause: Your compost pile had too much green material in proportion to brown and was too "hot" or high in nitrogen for that plant.

Did you know...

- Every year, lawns produce 300 lbs/ 1,000 square feet of cuttings when fertilized and watered appropriately. This helps produce more than enough compost for the average family's yard.
- All the food you throw away adds up: when contributed to a compost pile you don't have to pay to have your "green wastes" hauled away, *and* you get a great return.
- Chopping up your pile materials can speed up the decomposition process by up to one half the time.
- Your pile is healthy and working when it gives off heat and emits an agreeable odor.
- Compost is ready when the pile has diminished a bit and is uniformly dark in color.
- The time it takes to prepare and maintain your compost pile is much lower than your time's equivalent in money it takes to buy the same amount of compost. (Average amount around 30 bags per year means a savings of \$250 annually!)