Create a Compost Pile This Fall

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With the end of summer being only a few weeks away, it will soon be time to tidy up the gardens and think about collecting falling leaves. Instead of bagging up yard waste to remove from your property or just piling it in a corner, consider starting a compost pile where both debris from the yard and garden, as well as food scraps from the kitchen can be converted to a valuable soil amendment.

Compost has many properties that make it a great addition to all sorts of plantings. Adding compost can increase the organic matter of your soil. For most plants, it is desirable to have an organic matter content between 4 and 8 percent. Adequate amounts of organic matter improve the structure of the soil making it looser so that water, air and plant roots can move through it more easily.

Organic matter serves as a source of food and energy for the countless microbes that live in the soil and make plant life possible. They make the nutrients in compost available to plants and other forms of soil life. The pH of finished compost is close to neutral, where most of our garden plants prefer it to be, so using compost may make limestone additions unnecessary. Plus, composting fruit and vegetable scraps keeps them out of the trash and recycles them on the property.

When considering starting a compost pile, think about if you want it contained in some type of bin or just corralled with wire fencing or another barrier. Compost bins can be as simple or fancy as you desire. There are plenty of online directions for 1 to 3-bin DIY units. Plastic round or square bins can often be purchased at a discount rate from your municipality. Rotating units are good for keeping unwanted four-legged creatures out. Look to see what options are available and pick one to suit your needs.

Plastic compost bin. Photo by dmp2018.

Next think about where you want to locate your compost pile. Things to consider might be placing it where is will be readily accessible so it will be easy to add food or yard waste to the pile, is there space to turn the materials in the pile, is it near a water source, and if next to a neighbor's yard, does it look neat and tidy. Compost piles can be placed either in the sun or shade.

While all organic matter will eventually decompose, to hasten the composting process requires several components: a material high in nitrogen (greens), materials high in carbon (browns), moisture and oxygen. If supplied in adequate amounts, microbes and other soil-borne creatures will be happy to break down the larger pieces of food and yard wastes into a dark, rich soil amendment.

There are many compost 'recipes' and to a great extent, what is added to the compost pile depends on what is available to you. Sources of green materials include vegetable and fruit scraps, coffee and tea grounds, green leaves, untreated lawn clippings, weeds without seedheads and manure from herbivores. Dried leaves, shredded paper, spoiled hay, used animal bedding are sources of carbon. Beginning composters can try mixing 2 parts of browns to 1 part of greens in their bin. Often a shovelful of good garden soil or finished compost is added to inoculate the pile with microbes. Figure out what materials you have on hand.

Compost piles can be divided into 'hot' and 'cold' ones. If only relatively small amounts of materials are on hand, it makes sense to just add these to your pile, turn once every week or so and let nature do her thing. It may take a while for the materials to decompose but eventually they will be broken down and the finished compost from the bottom of the pile can be added to the garden at about a rate of ½ inch per year.

More enthusiastic composters strive for a 4 by 4 by 4 foot pile, carefully monitoring brown and green inputs as well as moisture, turning regularly and creating a 'hot' pile that decomposes more

quickly while at the same time killing any weed seeds and many pathogens. Decomposition may be complete in less than 6 months.

The bottom line is there is no right or wrong way to compost. Check out the many compost fact sheets on the UConn Soil Nutrient Analysis Lab's website, www.soiltesting.cahnr.uconn.edu. Also, each fall UConn offers a Master Composter Program. If you are interested in learning more about composting and sharing compost information, go to: https://homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu/welcome-master-composter/ For questions about getting started with composting or if you have any other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr,uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.