

Composting: Make Landscapes Not Landfills

If you were to walk through any of our planet's humid deciduous forests, beneath your feet you would find rich black soil, known as compost. Composting is nature's process of recycling decomposed organic materials into a rich soil that is highly beneficial to all plant material. This natural process is one more way in which we see that Mother Nature wastes nothing. Anything that was once living will eventually decompose. As organic material decomposes the energy that was once held within that life is converted into a substance that will aid in the production of new life. In humid, deciduous forests, this is a pretty rapid process. However, here in Flagstaff, natural composting can take many – even hundreds - of years. That means, if we want good soil, we are going to have to help make it by composting.

Backyard composting is simply an acceleration of the same process nature uses. By composting your organic waste you are returning nutrients back into the soil in order for the cycle of life to continue. Through this process we find that composting, while beneficial to our gardens, is even more beneficial to the sustainability of our ecosystem as a whole.

7 STEPS TO GREAT GARDEN COMPOST

Step one – decide what type of compost pile you want and where you want it located. You can compost in a pile, in a trench, or in a contained compost bin. You will need to place your compost where you can access it easily, where you can add water, and where it will get sunlight which will help bring the temperature up so your compost can cook. (The nitrogen in compost makes its own heat, but a little added sunlight helps bring your temperature up so your compost cooks more quickly.) You will also want to place it away from the house, as it can draw critters, and we certainly don't need to give the skunks a reason to come even closer to our house!

Step two – choose high quality materials. You will need brown materials (carbon materials) and green materials (nitrogen materials.) You will also need water and a starter batch of microorganisms to get things moving. To start, you will want a mix of 50% brown, 25 % green, and 25% good dirt or compost. You add the good dirt or compost because that should already contain lots of micro-organisms and they can start right in digesting your material.



Step three – layer your materials starting with brown materials and ending with some good dirt or compost. Wet your compost bin or pile until it just sticks together but isn't soaking wet. In Flagstaff, our air is very dry, so you may need to add a bit more water to keep it going.

Step four – turn or mix your compost. About every week to two weeks, you will need to give your compost a good mixing. You can turn stir it with a shovel or pitchfork or, if you have a bin, you can roll or spin the bin. Make sure it is in a place where it can get warm.

Step five – let it stew. The amount of time needed to produce compost depends on several factors, including the size of the compost pile, the types of materials, the surface area of the materials, and the number of times the pile is turned. With frequent turning, compost can be ready in about 3 months, depending on the time of year. In winter, the activity of the bacteria slows, and it is recommended that you stop turning the pile after November to keep heat from escaping the pile's center. In summer, warm temperatures encourage bacterial activity and the composting process is quicker.

Step six – determine whether it's ready. Before using compost you must determine if the compost has matured properly. This can be accomplished by purchasing a Compost test kit or alternatively by doing a germination test. To do a germination test, place seeds for germination in two containers; one container filled with compost, and a second container filled with regular potting soil. If the seeds in the compost germinate within the same amount of time as the potting soil then your compost is ready to use!

Step seven - USE IT to grow big, beautiful plants!!!

Misti Warner-Andersen
Warner's Store Manager