

Cool Composting is Not a Heap of Trouble

Compost is good, no matter how you heap it. Whether you have fancy containers or just a pile on the ground, you can recycle this year's garden trimmings into compost for next year's flowers and vegetables. Simple piles work well, but, some people worry that their compost pile does not get hot. If you cannot get the pile to heat, all is not lost. The pile will still break down slowly. Weed seeds and disease organisms will not be killed, but you will still have compost eventually.



Slow composting is often the best method for people who do not have the time to tend a hot compost pile. It is an easy and convenient way to turn yard wastes into a useful soil amendment. Slow, cool composting can be as simple as mixing chopped up yard wastes into a pile and letting them sit for a year. Microorganisms, insects, earthworms, and other decomposers will slowly break down the wastes.

The best food source for decomposers is a mixture of energy-laden wastes such as grass clippings, fruit and vegetable waste and garden trimmings. Add wood chips, sawdust, seedless straw and corn stalks for bulk. It is best to keep manure out of a cool compost pile that is not intensively managed. Some microorganisms in manure can cause human disease, and may not be killed without higher temperatures.

Throughout the year, add to your existing compost pile by opening the center of the pile and burying the new wastes in the middle. This helps aerate the pile and may help to discourage marauding pests. Or bury vegetable wastes directly in your garden. Dig a hole or a trench about a foot deep, add a few inches of vegetable wastes, mix them with the soil, and refill the trench with soil.

Since slow composting does not produce the heat needed to kill many weed seeds, it is best to compost weeds long before they develop seed heads. Avoid putting in diseased plants and perennial weeds such as bindweed, sheep sorrel and grasses with rhizomes, which could resprout. I practice slow, cool composting on my own property in an area that is subject to erosion during the winter. Into my pile go the fall leaves and some woody prunings from the yard. The bigger branches provide pathways for air to enter the pile. I sometimes stir the pile by lifting up on the big branches. By May or June, the fall leaves look like compost and only the coarse leafless branches remain. I find lots of night crawlers at the bottom of the pile and the pile holds the soil in place during heavy rains.

Composting reduces the amount of material going to the landfill and helps to enrich your soil. Try to keep all organic material on your property! This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact the Farm Advisor's office at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or 754-6477 with your agricultural questions. Talk to a certified Master Gardener every Wednesday, 10:00-12:00, 754-2880. To speak with a Master Gardener in Tuolumne County, please call 209 533-5696.