

Weekly Column
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Turning Yard Waste into Compost

Yard waste is a given every year. There will always be grass clippings, fallen leaves, and yard trimmings in the landscape. This waste is sometimes bagged and sent off to landfills where it is difficult for it to break down due to lack of air movement and water. Yard waste would break down much easier if composted right in your yard. An added bonus is the free compost you will have available to nourish your yard and garden.

Composting breaks down organic materials until they become soil-like. This compost can then be used to improve your soil and add nutrients to your plants and lawn. The smaller the material placed in the compost pile, the faster it will break down. For this reason, anything that is broken apart or chopped into smaller pieces will convert to compost faster than large pieces.

Kitchen waste can also be added to the compost pile. Vegetable and fruit scraps, coffee and tea grounds, and even egg shells can be used. You may wonder how to avoid insects and other pests when it seems you have created a buffet of treats for them. It is best to place food scraps in the center of the compost pile to deal with this issue. There are some food wastes that should not be used in the compost pile such as meat, bones, and fat scraps. It would be extremely difficult to avoid pests if these items are in the pile.

Compost can be created in an open pile or contained in some way. Containing structures can vary from wood, to wire, to plastic or cinder blocks. For proper composting, microorganisms, nitrogen, water, and oxygen are needed. To encourage the flow of oxygen, mix the compost pile at least once or twice a month. This will also aid in even heating of the pile and, therefore, speed up the composting process. Finished compost will resemble a uniform potting soil mixture with no chunks of materials present.

Composting is a great way to recycle yard waste and create something that can be used to enhance your lawn and garden. For more information on composting yard wastes, you can visit the web at <http://www.hort.purdue.edu/ext/ID-182.pdf>. You can also contact your Elkhart County Extension office for more information.

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