Source: Hamilton County Solid Waste District City of Loveland, 2011

Composting 101

Composting can be as simple as throwing organic materials into a pile and letting nature do its work.

City of Loveland

A hot pile means…

… it's working! A properly made compost pile will reach a temperature of 90 – 140° F in four to five days. You can purchase a temperature probe or soil thermometer at garden or hardware stores or through the Internet. You will notice the pile settling - a good sign that it is working!

Turning the pile

After five or six weeks, turn the materials in the pile. You should not need to turn the compost pile a second time; however, you can make compost faster by turning the pile more often.

Compost is ready to use when it is dark brown, crumbly, and earthy-smelling. For best results, let it stabilize a few extra days and sift it through a one-half inch screen (optional). When screening compost, be sure to use gloves and wash hands when finished.

Picking a Good Spot

Choose a composting site with plenty of room that is comfortable to work around and won't interfere with your family's lawn and garden activities. A shady, protected area is best because wind and direct sunlight will dry the pile, slowing decomposition.

Your compost pile should stay moist, so exposure to rain is fine, but make sure the area has good drainage. Since you may need to water the pile during dry spells, keep it within reach of a garden hose.

Your compost pile should not be located against wooden buildings or trees; wood in direct contact with compost will decay.

Looking for SPEED?

For faster results, just put in a little more effort. By building a bin, turning the pile every two to four weeks, and getting a good mix of carbon (i.e., leaves) and nitrogen (i.e., grass), a compost pile can decompose very quickly. Properly managed piles can break down organic material into compost in three months or less.

Compost Recipe

Building a compost pile is similar to a pot of soup - collect a few ingredients, mix well, and stir. When gathering materials to compost, remember that a good mix of high carbon material ("brown stuff") and high nitrogen material ("green stuff") is needed. The ideal mix of browns to greens is 3:1. Almost all-natural, organic material will compost but not everything belongs in a compost pile.

CAN be composted:

- Fruit and vegetable scraps
- Leaves
- Green plants
- Coffee grounds
- Tea bags
- Grass clippings
- Manure from animals that do not eat meat
- Flowers
- Pine needles
- Wood chips
- Shredded newspaper
- Wood ash
- Straw
- Sawdust
- Cornstalks
- Alfalfa hay
- Brush and shrub trimmings
- Prunings

DO NOT compost:

- Oils/fats/grease
- Bones
- Meat
- Weed seeds
- Salad dressing
- Diseased plants or weeds
- Inorganic material (i.e., plastic)
- Butter or dairy products
- Cat or dog manure

Always place food waste in the middle of your compost pile to avoid odors and pests. Using a covered compost bin when composting food wastes helps prevent raccoons. Additionally, be sure to wear gloves and wash your hands when working with compost.

General Guidelines for Basic Composting

Space - A minimum of 3 ft. x 3 ft. x 3 ft. of space is required to maintain the proper volume needed for an active compost pile.

Bin - Placing yardwaste in a bin is recommended but not essential. The bin provides an attractive, controlled environment to contain the material.

Oxygen - Turning the pile provides oxygen to the bacteria and other microorganisms doing the work.

Water - The pile should be moist like a damp sponge. With rain, the pile may stay moist without help. During dry spells, use a hose to keep the pile damp.

Material or Food - The microorganisms working to break down the pile need two types of food, carbon and nitrogen. To find out what should be composted, read on to learn about what is included in a compost recipe.

Common Problems and Solutions

My compost pile has a bad odor.

If your compost pile has a bad odor, it is most likely due to one of the following causes: not enough air, material is too wet, or there is too much nitrogen in the pile. To remedy the odor, try one of the following:

- Turn the pile more frequently.
- Add dry material such as leaves, straw, or sawdust.
- Add more carbon to the pile such as dead leaves, newspaper, etc.

My pile isn't decomposing.

If your pile isn't decomposing, it is due to lack of oxygen or nitrogen, or because the pile is too small. Freezing weather will slow or stop the decomposition rate. To increase decomposition, try the following:

- Turn the pile more frequently to add oxygen.
- Add a nitrogen source such as grass clippings, urea, bloodmeal, or coffee grounds.

Increase the size of the pile by adding more materials. A compost pile should be a minimum of 3 ft. x 3 ft. x 3ft.

Building or Purchasing a Compost Bin

A compost bin is not required; however, a bin holds in moisture and heat, speeding up the decomposition process (and it looks more attractive in the yard).

Wire Bin All you need is a length of woven galvanized wire (14-gauge wire) or snow fence. To determine the length needed, multiply the diameter of the bin desired by 3.2. The ideal diameter is three to five feet. Fasten the ends of the woven wire with four small chain snaps or plastic zip ties to make a circle.

Snow Fence Bin To build this bin, you need the appropriate length of prefabricated fencing. Fasten 2 x 4s as corner posts to the bottom to form a square.

Block or Brick Bin Compost bins can be made with bricks, cement, or blocks. Lay the blocks without mortar, leaving spaces between each block to allow aeration. Stack them to form three sides of a square container.

Wooden Bins A wooden bin can be constructed with a removable front or side so materials can be easily turned. Old wood pallets can also be used for construction.

- Park + Vine 1109 Vine Street, Cincinnati, 721-7275 www.parkandvine.com
- Worm's Way 1360 Donaldson Highway, Erlanger, KY 41018 www.wormsway.com
- Integra Contracting, Robert Waddell, 379-9069 integracontractingrrd@fuse.net
- Area Home Depot and Lowe's