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Beginning Composting

Using compost in your garden is a great way to follow the adage of feeding your soil and your soil will feed your plants. The use of compost can greatly reduce that amount of fertilizer that your garden needs. Making compost yourself has the dual advantage of providing you with free nutrition for your plants and helping to reduce the amount of trash hauled away from your house. Composting is a great way to reduce the amount of refuse you throw away and provide your plants with an excellent source of nutrients for little cost. While composting bins and systems vary widely in price the three main ingredients are free and are already available at your home. They are air, water, and compost material.

A single bin composter made from recycled plastic or galvanized metal is a good starter system. Place it in a sheltered area, preferably where it can get some sun and with space left around it for your wheelbarrow.

Now start filling it up with alternating layers of brown and green composting material. Brown material includes dead leaves or brown grass clippings, and greens are household food scraps, and plant or fresh grass clippings. Each layer should be about 6 to 8 inches. One thing to keep in mind is that the smaller the things that go in to the composter, the faster and more uniformly they will decompose. Also be sure not to compost plant material that is diseased or insect ridden.

Water can be tricky. If there is too little, the material won't break down and too much moisture creates a smelly slimy mess. The rule of thumb is the pile should feel like a wrung-out sponge. Every ten to fourteen days turn the pile over with a spade fork or shovel. This lets the air and water get to the middle of the pile to encourage faster decomposition.

Compost is ready for use when it is uniformly dark and most of the original material is unidentifiable. If there are larger bits of wood or material the compost can be run through a screen to remove them.

The completed compost can be worked into the soil or used as top dressing around established plants letting the rain and worms bring all those nutrients down into the soil.

Things to compost

Grass clippings	Fruit and vegetable peels/ cores
Dead leaves	Coffee and tea grounds w/ filters
Egg shells	Shrimp shells or crushed shells
Shredded newspaper or cardboard	Wood ash(not ash from charcoal grills)

Things NOT to compost

Meats and animal bones	Plastics, metals, glass
Dairy products	Ash from charcoal grills
Pet droppings	