

## Composting With Confidence

A few follow-up thoughts after the Bellevue Display Garden Zoom presentation, February 24<sup>th</sup>.

There just isn't time to say everything I want to say during a one-hour presentation, and probably, the audience only has a limited ability to absorb all of the information. So, this is a collection of thoughts that have popped into my mind that I wish I had said :)

Let's divide the list into suggestions for folks starting a new compost pile or bin, and suggestions for ongoing composting throughout the year.

If you are starting a new compost pile/bin, the first thing you need to consider is location.

It should be located:

- where it will be convenient to use
- where it will be free of invading grass and weeds
  - If you are building a pile on bare dirt, you might want to consider putting down several layers of cardboard to prevent grass and weeds from growing up into your pile
  - You also need to have a plan on how you will prevent surrounding grass and weeds from encroaching during the growing season
- close to a hose or water source so that you can moisten the pile if it dries out during the summer

The challenge of starting a pile in the spring is finding enough browns.

- Start now collecting any perennials or leftover plants from your vegetable garden that are needing to be cut back before spring. Also look for dead leaves that have accumulated under shrubs and trees. These materials will make a good base for your new pile.
- Mix in fresh, green weed leaves and grass clippings, then watch to see what happens. If the grass clippings are mixed into old dry material and don't get smelly and mushy you are good to go.
- Try adding fruit and vegetable scraps. You will know if you've added too many if the pile starts to smell.
- A big bag of fresh coffee grounds from your local coffee shop will probably help things along. Be sure to mix them in with the other, courser material. Coffee grounds can form a crust when they dry out and shed water and be hard to rewet.
- If you simply don't have any browns, you could use torn up cardboard for your first layer, then read the section on adding material during the summer.

## **SPRING**

if you have an existing compost pile/bin it's probably looking pretty brown right now. You can safely start mixing in greens, probably quite a few, without running the risk of adding too much nitrogen and having it getting smelly and nasty.

- This is assuming you have had it covered and it isn't soaking wet from the rain.
  - If it's saturated, you need to give it a good stir and start adding in courser greens such as weed leaves and stems, perennial trimmings, anything green that's left in the vegetable garden that needs to be removed
  - If you have grass clippings or fruit and vegetable scraps, they are a good green, but they will add moisture to the pile that's already really wet, so you may have to turn it again in a week or so

Remember to chop yard debris into pieces smaller than 6" or run over course material with your lawn mower. The lawn mower is a great way to mix dead leaves and garden trimmings with fresh grass clippings.

## **SUMMER**

Once plants have grown past the first flush of green in the spring, they settle into a growing pattern of building the "structure" of stems, leaves and flowers. During the summer, your yard and garden offer a variety of materials to add to the compost pile/bin:

- Any spent flowers that you are deadheading, as long as they aren't forming seed heads
- Stems and leaves of annuals and perennials that need to be cut back, for instance, peonies, and iris
- Flowering bushes or shrubs, like lilacs or hydrangeas have woody branches and stems. The flowers compost well, the woody stems aren't a problem, but they probably won't decompose as fast as the rest of the pile.
- All the trimmings and residue from the vegetable garden can be added, just chop up the large pieces, like broccoli leaves and stems, or use the lawn mower

My experience is that, even though they are all green in color, this type of plant material has a pretty good carbon/nitrogen balance. I've found that I don't need to worry about adding extra carbon/browns. If you are also adding a lot of fruit and vegetable scraps, which add nitrogen and moisture, and find your pile getting wet, heavy and smelly, then you will need to give it a good stir and adjust the carbon input.

## **FALL**

The season is winding down. If the conditions in your compost bin have been in balance (air, moisture, greens and brown, turned every so often) you should be coming close to having finished compost. You will know that it's "finished" when you aren't able to identify individual ingredients anymore (except egg shells, which take several years to decompose completely).

You can store the compost in the bin or pile as long as you keep it covered to prevent the nutrients from leaching out, or you can collect it and store it in a dry place for use in the garden next year.

Fall is a good time to start a pile/bin for use in the spring.

- Start with any partly decomposed material from your present pile, then mow over all of the perennial prunings and vegetable garden debris and toss that in
- If you have deciduous trees that drop leaves in your yard, mowing the leaves will shred them and mix them with the grass clippings all at the same time. Either spread this mixture on your vegetable beds as a winter cover, or add it to the compost pile.
- You will probably need to water it a bit, but don't water to the point of saturation. Wet piles don't dry out during the cold, damp of the winter, even if they are covered.
- Any of these additions will tilt toward the carbon side. You can safely add tea leaves, coffee grounds and fruit and vegetable scraps throughout the winter as long as you mix them into the existing material. They won't decompose as quickly as they will in the summer, but when spring comes, it will be ready to get started again as the weather warms up.
- Another reminder to cover it keep it from becoming soggy and to prevent the nutrients from washing out in the rain.

I hope this helps. Think of it as a grand experiment!