

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

April 15, 2024

Backyard Composting Easy & Beneficial

Composting yard and garden waste is beneficial from start to finish. Yard waste problems become soil amendment solutions. With next week being Earth Week, consider backyard composting to do your part to help in 2024.

Composting is an uncomplicated process. Adequate amounts of green and brown material (preferably shredded), oxygen, and moisture are all that is needed. Whether generating lots of yard waste or just lesser amounts, backyard composting is easy and adaptable.

Mixing green materials, high in nitrogen; and brown materials, high in carbon; is the backbone of composting success. This provides ideal conditions for microbes, primarily bacteria, to efficiently break plant material down. Green materials include grass clippings and fresh green plant parts. If these are not available, add some nitrogen fertilizer. Dead leaves or plant parts and straw are ideal brown materials.

Mix equal portions of greens and browns and put them into the bin. There is no set recipe with exact amounts as organic material composition varies. Piles consisting of mostly brown material decompose a little slower.

Smaller materials decompose faster because there is more surface area for the microbes to work, so chopping or shredding is suggested.

Proper moisture and oxygen levels are essential. Too much or too little of either hinders the process. Compost materials should be about as moist as a wrung-out sponge. Excessively wet piles start to smell; excessively dry piles "just sit there." Turning the pile helps monitor moisture levels, mix greens and browns, and supplies oxygen. Consider covering bins to keep moisture levels more consistent and under control.

Compost bins vary from simple poultry wire cylinders supported by stakes, elaborate constructed wood and wire bin systems, to commercially available barrels. A good minimum material volume size to consider is about three-foot width, length, and height. This ensures adequate volume for bacteria to thrive. With less material the process is just slower.

Piles heat up as bacteria work. Adjust greens and browns, along with pile volume, based on decomposition progress. Avoid food scraps to keep critters away. Each time the pile turns it should heat up again; when it does not the compost is finished.

Finished compost has an earthy smell, crumbles easily, and original plant parts can no longer be distinguished. Mix into sandy soils to help them hold more moisture; mix into clay to improve drainage. Compost can also be mixed with container soils. Compost works as an amendment to improve any soil and is called "gardeners gold."

Interested in learning more about
Horticulture in Iron County?
Feel free to contact:

Bruce Spangenberg
Horticulture Educator
Extension Iron County
300 Taconite Street, Suite 118
Hurley, WI 54534

Phone: 715-561-2695
Email: bruce.spangenberg@wisc.edu

