

Recycling: Feeding the Soil

By Becky Miller-Cripps

During the month of August, we've been exploring the eight principles of foothill-friendly gardening. For a copy of the tri-fold brochure describing foothill-friendly gardening, call the UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County hotline at 209-533-5912. Or search Facebook for either Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County or Calaveras County. Both Facebook pages now post the brochure.

Foothill-friendly gardening principle number four is "Feed the Soil" and principle number five is "Recycle." Composting – a way to feed the soil – is one of the simplest forms of recycling. It's as easy as piling leaves in a corner of the backyard and letting them decompose. By adding kitchen waste, grass clippings and chopped shrub prunings, you can create a rich soil additive at no cost. Composting also reduces the amount of green waste that is often sent to the landfill.

Many different types of composting containers are available, from simple circular wire enclosures to permanent three-bin systems. Many people use pallets (often obtained at no cost from various businesses in the community) to construct a three-bin system. Pallets can be nailed at right angles to create three areas – one for rough, newly cut materials; one for compost "in progress;" and one for compost that is decomposed and ready to use.

If you wish to set up a compost pile, select a spot in your yard that will not interfere with other family activities, yet is conveniently located to the house and garden and will provide room to work and store the raw materials. Soft, succulent materials do not need to be chopped into small pieces because they decompose rapidly. Woody material such as tree trimmings or plant stems decay slowly. They should first be cut or chopped into small pieces before adding them to the pile.

The size of the pile is important. A freestanding pile needs to be a minimum of one cubic yard (36" X 36" x 36") to build up the amount of heat necessary to facilitate quick decomposition. Heat retention is greater in bins or enclosures than in open piles, so compost piles in containers can be slightly smaller. As materials decompose, the pile should shrink to about half its original size.

The moisture level of the pile is also important. Beneath the surface the compost pile should feel like a damp sponge. When the compost resembles dark brown crumbly soil and stops producing heat, it is ready to be used.

Compost contains small amounts of essential plant nutrients that are released slowly to the soil. It also improves the physical condition of the soil by reducing surface crusting, aiding water infiltration and plant root penetration, and improving soil aeration. When used as a mulch, compost retards evaporation of water from the soil, lessens soil compaction by rain drops on the soil surface, reduces weed growth and soil erosion, and improves water penetration.

If you still have a traditional turf lawn you may want to consider grass-cycling. Grass clippings left on the lawn add the equivalent of one nitrogen feeding per year, thus reducing synthetic fertilizer purchases, preventing fertilizer run-off and saving money.

Many more materials than green waste can also be recycled. Some local trash disposal companies offer curbside recycling. Waste Management, Inc.'s buy-back center at 14959 Camage Avenue, Sonora, CA will pay for accepted recycled materials.

Earth 911 is an excellent source of information about recycling, repurposing and reusing. According to their website, <http://earth911.com/> they're "all about living green and clean." They offer a weekly newsletter and emails that contain green living hacks, DIY projects, recycling guides, and eco-friendly travel tips.

Headings on their webpage include "Eco Tech," "Home and Garden," "Travel," "Living and Being Well," among others. Under the "Inspire" heading are numerous stories about urban gardening, living plastic-free, access to nature, and home-created cleaning and skin care products. Their web page even offers a "Green Dog Owner's Guide." You can find a recycling locator for various items from automotive materials to plastics, and articles about zero waste and how to be an advocate for better recycling in your community.

Yvon Chouinard, the founder of Patagonia, said, "imagine an economy that doesn't destroy the planet." He suggests we be very thoughtful in our purchases, buy quality that lasts, and when we've outgrown the item or no longer need it, sell it used, donate it to someone who can use it and ultimately recycle it. Be the ultimate recycler by making sure that none of your yard and kitchen "waste" leaves your premises.

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