



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

COMPOSTING

By Trish Grenfell, Placer County Master Gardener

Q Soon I will be raking leaves up and into the green garbage bin. This year I am considering a compost pile but I am afraid it is too much trouble. What is involved?

A As renowned horticulturist Felder Rushing advises, “Quit throwing that stuff away and pile it up somewhere.” So if you have the stuff, you just need a place. It’s as simple as that. Compost happens! If it didn’t, the forest debris would be covering the treetops.

Now...the kicker is, how fast do you want it to happen? If you just have a pile of leaves, it may take years. Or if you carefully follow “the recipe,” it could be ready to apply to your garden soil in less than a month. I personally have found that my home brewed compost beautifies and enriches my garden better than any compost I have ever purchased—probably due to the variety of kitchen scraps I throw in the pile. And that brings me to the

Ingredients:

The moist “**Greens**” contain nitrogen (the lighter fluid): flowers, fruit & vegetables, grass clippings (the greener the better), any green plant material, coffee grounds, tea leaves, and manure. I know the last three are not green, but for the recipe they are considered green.

The dry “**Browns**” contain carbon (the material to be decomposed): autumn leaves, dried plant material, sawdust (not from laminated wood), non-shiny paper, wood chips, straw, cardboard.

DO NOT USE diseased plants, plants sprayed with herbicide, weeds, invasive plants like Bermuda grass, cat/dog manure, meat, fish, dairy, fats, wood ashes, BBQ ashes, cedar.

Directions:

- 1) Cut the material into small pieces with lawn mower, the smaller the faster the decomposition.
- 2) Layer greens and browns in the pile, using the same volume of each and watering each layer until the materials are the consistency of a wrung-out sponge. If it is too wet, it will smell.
- 3) Finished pile size should be approximately 3’x3’x3’.
- 4) Provide oxygen for the decomposition by turning the pile—you don’t want it matted down. For maximum speed, turn every 3 to 4 days. Less often prolongs the process.
- 5) Be happy when you see fungi, worms, and other small critters in the piles since they are decomposing helpers. If you attract ants, the pile is too dry.

The compost is done when it is dark brown and rich smelling. We call it “brown gold” because it transforms us into masters of the ornamental and edible gardens.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION



PLACER COUNTY

11477 E Avenue
Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 889-7385

E-Mail: ceplacer@ucdavis.edu

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NEVADA COUNTY

255 So Auburn
Grass Valley, CA 95945
(530) 273-4563

E-Mail: cenevada@ucdavis.edu