

Composting as a New Year's resolution

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Q. One of my New Year's resolutions has been to stop burning my leaves and to start composting them but I am not sure how to get started as I have quite a few leaves. Can you give me some advice on how to get started without spending a lot of money on fancy compost bins?

A: I commend you for making this resolution! Not only is the smoke from burning leaves terrible for the environment and those who breathe the smoke filled air, it also removes valuable nutrients from your soil. By composting the leaves you will increase the water-holding capacity of your soil and provide a buffet of plant nutrients and beneficial microbes to your garden and landscape plants. The organic matter stimulates healthy root development and "de-compacts" heavy clay. With just a little help from us, nature recycles the earth's material and decreases our volume of waste.

It is not too hard to start a compost pile. You may have heard the phrases "compost happens" or "let it rot." It's absolutely true! When you leave certain organic materials alone, they will eventually decompose into wonderful soil amendment. It's just a matter of how long it takes. If you are lax (and busy) like me and can be patient, you can throw together a pile of green and brown material, toss it around once in a while, water it and wait for the magic to happen. It may take a year that way. But if you are one of those people who are willing to put in a little more work by turning the pile more frequently, the decomposing happens faster. Either way, the process and recipe to create compost is the same. For decomposition to happen there has to be a proper balance of food (greens and browns), air and water.

Here is an easy, fast and inexpensive composting method recommended by the University of California. First, pick an out of the way, sunny location near a water source as you will need to add water to the pile. Decide if the pile is going to be loose or held together with chicken or field fence wire. Next, throw together a pile of "browns" (carbon-rich materials such as your leaves) and "greens" (nitrogen-rich materials, such as lawn clippings, food waste and manure) by alternating them in layers like a cake. Try to create a pile that is a minimum of 3 to 4 feet cubed in order to retain the heat needed to break down the ingredients. You want the brown layer to be a bit thicker than the green layer, too much green in relation to brown causes the pile to get too hot. Temperatures of 120 to 160 degrees are desired and will kill most weed seeds. Anything over 160 degrees can kill the microorganisms

required to develop compost and cause your pile to stop composting. As you create your pile, thoroughly hose down the layers with water. When correctly moistened, the materials should feel like a damp sponge. Once you have the pile built, do not add anything more to the pile and turn the pile over occasionally to give it air (oxygen). The breakdown occurs by microorganisms (soil saprophytes - bacteria and fungi) feeding on decaying matter and decomposing it and they need moisture and oxygen to do this. Move the bottom rotted material onto the outside and newer, drier ingredients to the inside of the pile. Air can't circulate in a dense, wet, compacted pile.

Here are some examples of compostable materials you may already have:

Greens (nitrogen-containing) material: grass and shrub clippings (chopped small), wilted flowers, raw fruit and vegetable trimmings, hair, coffee grounds, tea bags.

Browns (carbon-containing) materials: pine needles, dry leaves, straw, sawdust, crushed egg shells, shredded paper, coffee filters.

Do not compost: dairy or greasy foods, dirt, ashes, fish, animal products and diseased plants.

Some common things that new composters do wrong that cause the pile to not "heat up" properly (it still breaks down, but slowly). First they don't always bother to reduce the size of what they throw into the pile. The bigger the pieces (especially browns), the longer it takes to decompose. Shred your ingredients or run the mower over the leaves to reduce the size. The second common mistake is that they do don't make a big enough pile. It shrinks as it decomposes and smaller piles don't generate enough heat. Other mistakes are that they do not water the pile often enough, during the summer piles may need water added daily. A dry compost pile decomposes very slowly. On the other hand to wet of a pile will also compost slowly and may start to stink. The pile will also slow down if it is not turned often..