

COMPOSTING -- so many kinds to choose from. . .

At first, it may look like we take a very laissez-faire attitude toward composting. Truth of the matter: we only do what's best for our families in the amount of space (residential lot) and time available, plus provide for the vegetables and flowers -- in place, wherever possible.

Composting is divided in two chores:

- 1.** The kitchen scraps (green) are put into a round tumbler-composter with several handfuls of leaves, paper or mulch on top. It eventually breaks down to be taken out of a small door in the bottom. (Used for planting, propagating, seeds, etc.)

When/if this tumbler becomes too full, we have a round, plastic garbage can with a tight fitting lid (and wheels) with holes burned in the sides. Round is best, because it can be rolled where it's needed, or turned. Same routine, as above.

Note: Not to be used are: charcoal ash, dairy products, diseased or insect-ridden plants, fats or anything oily, meat, fish, pet or people wastes, grass treated with chemicals, such as herbicides. Smaller pieces are better -- we chop or cut some of the tougher waste. Egg shells (valuable for calcium) should be crushed--in fact, the crushed shells can go into coffee filters before making coffee, than thrown together in the compost afterward.



- 2.** Since we already have some greens and leaves down in the Fall, in the early Summer green cuttings and any residue not of interest to the animals (like corn husks or shrub clippings) are placed between the rows.

We also start a casual compost heap in the garden, itself, with old tomatoes, vines, clippings, etc. This is usually used up with the Fall Garden and is good to surround with potatoes or other "in ground" crops. It seems the secret to a "compost pile" is listed as the classic below. That pile "heats up" or cooks, but with a garbage composter, and sheet mulching, we don't find any of this necessary, using the sticks or "uncooked" pile between the rows of the Fall garden.



What to do with all those leaves on the lawn?

Clean up in the Fall is again placed in the informal three foot round pile in the garden and the whole garden is covered with leaves for Spring planting. In the Spring, a little compost from the black garbage composters is spread over each row to be seeded and a little compost put in with each plant.

More alternatives use the classic compost pile essentials of air, water, carbon (brown) dead leaves, wood chips, etc. (25-30 times more carbon than nitrogen;) and nitrogen (green) kitchen scraps & yard waste. These are layered and microbes feed on all. The water and oxygen with regular turning, keep it "cooking." This can be done in a 3' by 3' bin of chicken wire filled with leaves (brown) and using rabbit food for the green scraps, if none is available. 3' by 3' is about right, anything else may be too difficult to handle and won't heat up properly. (Aside: We theorize that eventually everything will break down anyway, so it's put between the rows.)

Or another alternative is vermicomposting: using earthworms to convert nutrient-dense materials, food wastes and green crop residues, into forms usable by plants. It's been our experience that worms are always found in the soil, if it's not too disturbed.

Or another... The spading fork also breaks up the soil a bit when harvesting potatoes and all, but leaves the surrounding area to rebuild the soil food web and microbes underneath.

Or another: Some like to bury the garbage and put tiles or bricks on top, but quite frankly, we have too many animals here to do that, and think the composters are a good substitute and faster, too.

And for container gardening or soil in general, we're experimenting with a system that provides both water and air, but so far there's nothing to report. Jeff Lowenfels' and Wayne Lewis' book, Teaming with Microbes: The Organic Gardener's Guide to the Soil Food Web, revised edition (<http://www.underwoodgardens.com/Book-Teaming-with-Microbes/productinfo/T1073/>) tells about how microbes help the garden and gives instructions for adding air. Not only does it sound interesting, but using an actively aerated compost "tea" may help your lot be more sustainable.

If you have tried anything along the compost lines, let us know on the form provided on the Home page -- we're anxious to hear from everyone!