

# GARDENER'S BULLETIN

A BIMONTHLY NEWSLETTER FOR MEMBERS OF THE CIVIC GARDEN CENTER

## Don't Look Now, But Compost is Happening!

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**I**T MAKES SENSE to compost fall garden clippings and leaves. After all, it's ridiculous to dispose of fall leaves and then turn around and purchase bags or yards of soil amendments. But it takes a lot of work to make compost, and it's all quite complicated, right?

Absolutely not! Compost happens. If you pile up organic materials, eventually they will break down into compost—with or without human intervention. It's all a part of nature.

Compost is a dark, crumbly, sweet smelling material similar to the top layer in the forest. It's excellent at improving the soil, and thus helps transform our heavy clay into rich garden soil.

You can make compost in a simple pile, but confining the pile in a bin or a cylinder made of wire mesh will keep it from getting scattered and help you tend the compost. Into this cylinder, leaves, grass clippings, manure and garden scraps are layered.

Turning the pile helps aerate it and break up materials. The more frequently the material is mixed up or turned, the faster it will decompose into compost. It can take as little as two months during warm weather with

weekly turning, to over two years for "lazy compost", that involves no turning at all.

### COMPOST FACTS

**What:** Vegetable matter, animal manure and other organic refuse are converted from waste material to a rich soil amendment.

**Why:** Compost improves the soil's texture, aeration and water holding ability. It makes nutrients in the soil more available to plants.

**When:** Compost can be started any time. Fall is ideal, because biological activity is at its peak and garden cleanup makes plenty of raw materials available for the pile.

**How:** The nitrogen in the raw materials is food for bacteria that decompose the materials. Worms and insects further decompose the materials. Heat is produced in the pile by the microorganisms as they grow, consume and digest the raw materials.

materials in the pile (by adding green garden waste), or the surface area of the materials (by shredding).

**Troubleshooting:** If the compost is slow to decompose, a handful of nitrogen fertilizer gives the decomposing microbes a "boost". If the pile has an ammonia odor, it's too wet. Turn the pile frequently to facilitate drying, and cover the pile when it's rainy. The pile should be kept as wet as a squeezed out sponge.

**Maturation:** Compost is ready when the materials are rich and dark in color and crumbly in texture—usually in 6 months to a year. The fibers do not need to be completely broken down.

**Application:** A cubic yard of finished compost weighs approximately 1,000 pounds. Use about 50 pounds per 100 square feet, or dig a one to three-inch layer into the soil. ♦

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