

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT COMPOSTING

In great gardening countries like England and Japan, no garden is complete without a compost pile made from garden and kitchen waste to condition and feed the soil. In Canada, gardeners are still learning about composting and, from our experience, there are 10 FAQ's about composting and compost piles.

1. DOES COMPOST HAVE ANY VALUE AS A FERTILIZER?

Yes if it is made properly, built up in layers from materials that contain essential plant nutrients. Green wastes such as grass clippings and green leaves are a source of nitrogen; bone meal and rock phosphate are a source of phosphorous, and wood ashes are an excellent source of potash. Compost also conditions the soil, improving the moisture-holding capacity of sandy soils, and breaking up sticky, clay soils. The only difference between compost and a chemical fertilizer is that compost adds nutrients and conditions the soil packaged fertilizer adds nutrients only.

2. WHAT MATERIALS ARE BEST FOR COMPOSTING?

From the house: fruit and vegetable peelings, shredded newspapers, coffee grounds, tea bags, wood ashes, cotton and wool rags and hair. From the garden: grass clippings, hedge trimmings, weeds, flower heads, frosted annuals and shredded leaves. Leaves and fibrous weed roots are best shredded with a lawn mower to speed decomposition. * Do not add meat or dairy products, pet litter or diseased plants.

3. HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE COMPOST?

It depends on the method used and time of year (warm temps speed decomposition). With a compost bin, which prevents waste materials from drying out or becoming waterlogged, it is possible to have useful compost within six weeks.

4. IS IT NECESSARY TO ADD CHEMICALS TO A COMPOST PILE TO HELP IT DECOMPOSE?

No - but a compost pile often needs an "activator", an additional source of nitrogen to speed decomposition, especially when the weather gets cold. Nitrogen is obtainable in chemical form but it is also widely available organically. Animal manure, bone meal and bloodmeal make excellent natural "activators", and help to achieve the correct nitrogen/carbon ratio.

5. DO COMPOST PILES ATTRACT PETS, ANIMALS OR VERMIN?

Not if the compost is made in a compost bin and the mixture contains no meat scraps. A properly made and well-ventilated compost pile becomes too hot, dense and moist for the comfort of vermin.

6. DO COMPOST PILES HAVE OFFENSIVE ODOURS?

Not if the compost is made in a bin with adequate ventilation. As decomposition occurs the mixture will give off a pleasant "yeasty" odour, but it is not offensive.

7. DO COMPOST HEAPS NEED TURNING?

With an exposed compost pile the sides have a tendency to dry out and so, turning the heap will ensure thorough decomposition. Turning an exposed heap also aids aeration. With an enclosed bin, ventilation from below and along the sides provides adequate aeration without the need for turning. Also the protection provided by a bin extends fermentation to all areas of the compost heap.

8. HOW CAN YOU TELL WHEN COMPOST IS READY?

Well-made compost has the appearance of moist, dark, crumbly earth with a pleasant "earthy" odour. It can be shoveled into a wheelbarrow and spread directly onto the garden in Spring or Fall, or at any time during the growing season as a mulch.

9. CAN COMPOST FEED LAWNS?

Yes, and it should be spread evenly over the lawn in the Fall and during winter the compost will work its way into the existing soil. By Spring it will all be absorbed into the upper soil surface, helping the grass to grow thick and healthy.

10. WHAT HAPPENS IN WINTER?

Keep on feeding it. Even with below freezing temperatures there will be a bit of activity, but it is like a refrigerator, by Spring when it thaws, you have all the necessary material ready for rapid decomposition.

BENEFITS OF COMPOSTING:

Better vegetables, lawns, flowers and house plants. The rich quality of compost not only produces healthier, more flavourful vegetables and improved yields; it will enrich flowerbeds and houseplants and produce lush lawns.

- Weedfree compost: the intense heat kills off harmful germs and weed seeds.
- Conditions your soil, prevents cracking, run-off and erosion.
- Encourages beneficial earthworms.
- Recycles garden and kitchen wastes, giving back to the soil what has been taken from it.
- Helps protect and improve the environment - solves garbage disposal problems.