COMPOST AND WATER CONSERVATION

By Christine Hollenbeck

Compost is one of nature's best mulches and soil amendments. It improves soil structure, texture and aeration, while increasing soil's water holding capacity. Regular applications of compost to clay soil will help loosen the soil and will increase sandy soil's ability to retain moisture.

Compost can be used in place of commercial fertilizers, because it provides all the nutrients necessary for maintaining healthy plants and gardens.

Adding compost to you garden and flower bed areas will cool the soil, improve soil fertility and stimulate healthy root growth in plants. Remember, a healthy plant in healthy soil requires much less water during hot summer months.

HOW TO CREATE YOUR OWN COMPOST

To get started, you'll need a container to produce your compost. A box or bin, 4-foot square, 4-foot high, with one side open or cut so the side can be easily be removed is especially suited for a backyard garden. The container can be constructed of various materials such as chicken wire and post, picket fencing material, cement blocks, wooden planks, and bricks or stones. You may want to create a container that can be covered in the winter, so your compost stays heated and continues decomposing throughout the winter. If making your own container is not your cup of tea, various styles and sizes are available to purchase, ready for use with little or no assembly. When purchasing a compost container, keep in mind you want easy access for regular aeration, turning and removing the finished compost.

CHOOSING A SITE FOR YOUR COMPOST CONTAINER

The composting container should be placed over level, well-drained soil or lawn, and your compost pile should be as wet as a well wrung sponge. The site should provide some sun light to keep it warm in the winter and shelter it from cold winds. Take care not to pick a spot that is too hot and dry.

HOW TO MAKE THE COMPOST

Almost any organic material is suitable for a compost pile. Healthy compost needs a mixture of carbon-rich materials, “browns” and nitrogen-rich materials, “greens.”
Some good examples of “brown” material are wood chips, dryer lint, dried grass clippings, dried and shredded leaves, fire place or hard wood ash in thin layers, old potting soil, small amounts of wood chips, shredded paper or cardboard and straw.
“green” materials are kitchen scraps, like coffee grounds, tea & tea bags, egg shells, all vegetable and fruit scraps, pesticide free grass clippings (used sparingly), manure, garden refuse, hair (human and animal), feathers and flowers.
The best mix of “brown” and “green” materials is two parts “brown” and one part “green”. Compost created using this ratio will heat and produce the fastest. Other compost piles will produce compost, but at a slower rate.

There are a few elements that should not be added to a compost pile. Items like dog manure, coal ashes or charcoal, fish scraps, meat, fat/grease, lime, milk and cheese, can kill the micro-organisms that create healthy compost and attract unwanted animals and rodents.

COMPOST MAINTENCE AND USE

Turn and aerate your compost regularly. You can aerate by using a garden fork, a shovel or a compost aerator. You can even stab a broom handle into the compost pile all the way to the bottom for the same effect, but be sure to do this in a few places. The holes left behind allow oxygen to enter the pile. When adding kitchen scraps, bury them under about 8 inches of compost. This helps to mix them in, and keeps unwanted animals away.

Compost is ready to be spread when the debris is broken down, is a dark color, and has become a rich hummus. Remove the useable material from the bottom of your compost pile and add it to your garden space and flower beds. It is not necessary to mix the compost into the soil. It will work its way in over time. You can add as much as 3 – 4 inches of compost on top of your soil. Be careful not to bury the crowns of your plants. This may cause rotting.

Continue adding material to your compost pile. When the container is full, or you see that the compost is ready to use, remove the compost from the bottom of your container and add it to your flower beds and gardens. Every compost pile has its own personality. In time you will get to know and understand yours. Composting is a labor of love, but the love clearly out weighs the labor.

For more information about composting at home visit these web sites, www.compostguide.com, www.metro-region.org, www.mastercomposter.com.

About the author

Christine currently works for Oak Lodge Water District as its Cross Connection Coordinator and Water Conservation Specialist. Christine spent the last six years working for a private consulting company that assists public water systems in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, where she primarily focused on implementing and maintaining Cross Connection programs. Christine also has experience working in commercial and private plant nurseries, and has been involved in the commercial landscape field. She's obtained her Oregon and Washington Cross Connection Inspectors certification and Oregon Backflow Assembly Tester certification. Additionally, she has been an instructor in Washington and Idaho certifying individuals as Cross Connection Specialists. Christine has always loved plants, gardening and the environment.