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12/13/78

How does your garden grow

Do you have grass clippings, pulled weeds, shrub trimmings, horse manure or kitchen scraps? If so, making them into compost will recycle valuable plant wastes, fertilize and texturize your soil, and save you money.

Compost is made by soil bacteria, fungi, and other organisms decomposing plant materials. These organisms require oxygen and nitrogen. The result is a dark, crumbly material that will fertilize your plants, prevent your soil from crusting, and aid in water penetration and root growth.

To start your compost pile, make a layer about 6-12 inches high of shrub or bush trimmings at least 3 feet by 3 feet square. Walk on it to compress it, then wet it down with water. Next, if you have it, make another layer of shrub material that is not as coarse or rough. Water that also.

Make another layer (12" or so) of what you have—grass clippings (no more than 1 day old), leaves, kitchen scraps, horse manure, etc. Be sure it is moistened well. Continue layering until the pile is at least 3-4 feet high. If no animal manure is available, put in a couple of 1" layers of soil to add soil bacteria and other organisms.

If left alone, this pile should be ready in about 4-5 months. To speed up the process, you should aerate the pile. Simply turn the materials over to a spot immediately alongside the pile. By aerating the pile

you add oxygen which the bacteria need. Frequent turning of a compost pile will drastically reduce the time needed to finish the pile.

If you plan to turn your compost, you may leave out the shrub material as it acts to help oxygen circulate in the pile. Also, you should clear the surface of the soil where the pile is to be, so removal of compost will be easier.

Your compost should get quite hot within a day of being built. Temperatures of 140-160 degrees F are common, and mean the bacteria are at work. After a while, other bacteria start working and the temperature drops until eventually the pile completely cools off. When the materials are dark and crumbly and no longer recognizable, the compost is ready.

During the winter you will want to protect your compost from rain as too much water will drown the bacteria. When turning compost, moisten if it seems dry. If an ammonia smell is present, turn less often. If the pile is not warm, turn more often.

You may want to construct a wood or stone compost bin to improve the pile's aesthetic qualities. The Cooperative Extension office in Santa Barbara has free information on compost making.

Questions on organic gardening? Send them with a self-addressed stamped envelope to Marc Borgman, Community Garden Coordinator, 889 Camino del Sur, Isla Vista, CA. 93017.