

Gold in them hills: Making compost pile has rewards

BY ADRIAN HIGGINS
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Clay hardpan may stand the test of time, but good garden loam is a thing of fragile beauty. It is in constant need of repair and replenishment, especially after weeks of rainfall.

Fixing it is work. You can scuff it up or add a layer of bark mulch to hide it. In time, the mulch will break down and improve the soil. Chopped-up leaves make a better amendment, but the best additive is a thin layer of compost. Visit the world's best gardens, and you will see a wheelbarrow full of the stuff and a gardener carefully spreading it around existing plants and digging it into bare beds.

With the aid of earthworms and other critters, an inch or two of compost annually will improve the structure of the soil, add micronutrients and promote robust and healthy plants.

Humberto Zeitler is the compost wizard at Brookside Gardens in Wheaton, Md. Zeitler turns an estimated 250 cubic yards of root balls, prunings, grass clippings, bark, branches, leaves and old potting soil into the gardener's black gold each year.

Two large, narrow piles, each about the size of a bus, dominate the yard. Compost making is an art as much as a science, much like baking good bread, and one of the first signals that Zeitler has mastered it is telegraphed by the nose — by the smell. Or rather the lack of it. Dig into his compost pile and it gives off a slightly pungent vapor. Stick your nose in and smell deeply, and there is an earthy aroma. There is no stink.

The home gardener is not going to have similarly massive compost piles — windrows in gardening parlance — or the heavy-duty chippers, shredders and front-end loaders needed to

create it. But though the scale here is larger than any domestic endeavor, "the principles are the same," said Zeitler.

You need enough material — a pile that is a minimum of three to four feet in every direction — and the correct mix of the two basic ingredients, carbon and nitrogen.

■ Carbon is present in brown stuff like leaves, shredded branches, wood chips and pine needles.

■ Nitrogen is abundant in green stuff such as grass clippings and kitchen and vegetable garden scraps. (Eggshells are okay, but don't use meat, meat products or pet waste, to avoid drawing rodents and worse).

If you can find it, horse, cattle and poultry manure all make great compost ingredients, but unless the material is blended with lots of straw or other bedding, it is high in nitrogen and should count as a green material.

The beneficial bacteria that turn all this raw stuff into compost need a lot more brown stuff than green stuff in their diet. For every bucket of green material, you will want at least 20 buckets of brown matter, said Zeitler. Mix this together before you make your pile.

Some compost makers avoid the mixing step by simply layering brown and green, but Zeitler frowns on this, saying this lasagna will collapse internally and you will still have to mix the compost.

Mixing is the most arduous process but also the most necessary. The same bacteria that do the work and generate great heat while doing so also need plenty of oxygen. If things get matted and airless, the microbial heroes die off, to be replaced by evildoers that work without oxygen. It is these noxious bacteria that cause an unholy stink and render the compost useless.

How do you turn a compost

pile? In the home garden, the classic model is of three bins set next to each other, with each pile in a different stage of decomposition. On this scale, compost is best moved with a pitchfork or garden fork.

Some home composters consist of large plastic barrels that can be tumbled to mix compost—effective but expensive, and awkward to place out of sight.

Zeitler monitors how well his compost is cooking by checking the temperature, using a five-foot-long compost thermometer. Think of a meat thermometer that just kept growing. Shorter ones are available for the home gardener.

When the needle falls to 100 or lower, he knows that composting action will be soon over and time to turn the pile again, or to water it. Composting microbes need moisture to work.

By the end of fall, the first pile will look like the second, which was started last November: black, finely textured, soil-like and cool. Ready to be used. Coarse compost like this can be used as a bed amendment. If you want to use it as a growing medium, especially for seedlings, it should be screened. I make a sieve from 2-by-4s, formed into a rectangle and clothed on one side with quarter-inch hardware cloth. I place it on top of a deep wheelbarrow, shovel compost on it and push the material through with gloved hands.

The smaller you can shred materials before mixing them into compost, the more surface area the microbes will have to work on, and the sooner the ingredients will break down. On leaves, this can be achieved with a lawn mower, but branches are best chopped with a chipper/shredder. Brookside's outreach horticulturist, Kerrie Nichols, suggests stockpiling brush and then renting a machine every few

months at compost-making time.

When is compost-making time? An obvious period is in early November, when the leaves are gathered; another at the end of winter, when the garden is cleaned of branches and withered perennials in advance of the spring growth. But any time can be compost time, and

compost making, even when done well and by the book, takes months. It is a continuous enterprise, just as replenishing the soil is a constant aspect of gardening.

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