

CALLIE MARTIN
Skagit Valley Herald
October 2009

Throw a magical fall party- in your compost pile

This October throw a party — and make compost! Yard debris, fallen leaves and all those summer grass clippings offer you a chance to get outside and create something magical, all without spending a dime on soil amendments or green waste disposal costs. The time spent for home composting is an investment you won't regret.

Prep for the date

Before your first rendezvous with compost, familiarize yourself with some key characteristics.

What is it? Compost is simply decomposed organic matter and it happens without any help from us. However, for organic matter in your yard to turn into nutrient-rich soil, it needs live bugs, bacteria, molds and fungi to dine on the debris and to start a party.

The metabolic action of these critters turns decayed matter into the “black gold” our gardens need. They need to “party” with full force to make hot, quick compost and help you to host the decomposition process.

How to begin? One cubic yard (3 feet wide by 3 feet long by 3 feet tall) may seem like a cozy fit for your yard debris, but it's the perfect-size compost bin to get things cooking. Build a bin this size for cheap by retrieving four free pallets from a lumber yard or elsewhere. Strap them together at the corners with baling wire or garden twine.

Multiple resources in Skagit County offer bin design, construction plans and other materials for residents to explore. The Mount Vernon city shop sells manufactured Earth Machine composting systems — \$25 to city residents and \$37 for all others.

Skagit County Public Works Solid Waste Division provides educational materials upon request and teaches home composting classes. The next class runs from 3 to 6 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 28, at the WSU Discovery Garden (see infobox).

Part of your composting party prep entails reserving a space in your yard or garden for the bin. Select a location that is neither too cold nor too damp, yet accessible and easy to use. Avoid placing the bin under cedar trees; their bark and evergreen leaves have antibacterial properties that slow microbial breakdown in a compost pile.

Out for Lunch

It can seem like a challenge to feed a party of hungry microorganisms, but usually they are happy to feast on whatever leftovers you collect. Like any living thing, the little critters need a balanced diet, which means providing a “tossed salad” of both nitrogen (green) and carbon (brown) materials. While brown materials act as the main meal, green materials give microorganisms a burst of heat and energy.

To keep the “party” from getting out of hand, maintain a ratio by weight of three parts brown material to every one part green material, when adding yard waste to your compost bin. Some green-colored materials, such as pine needles, may actually be browns, and some browns actually greens, like coffee grounds.

An online carbon-to-nitrogen ratio calculator from Klickitat County can help:

www.klickitatcounty.org/SolidWaste/fileshtml/organics/compostCalc.htm. Experiment by changing the quantity of materials until you get the correct ratio.

Of course, some yard and garden materials should never be added to your compost pile, such as these:

Hard, shiny seeds. Examples: blackberries and tomatoes

Diseased plants. Especially rose leaves with black spots

Noxious weeds. Examples: Quack grass, morning glory, buttercup, ivy. Alternatively, cook the weed clippings in a black plastic bag, or throw them away.

Cat, dog or pig manure. Prevent human disease by avoiding these.

Meat, fat, or kitchen scraps. Such scraps can attract vermin. Non-meat food scraps can be composted in a worm bin, rather than a compost bin.

Grass treated with weed-and-feed products.

Sod. It's too heavy and is difficult to turn.

Enjoy the ambience

Every party creates a certain ambience and a healthy compost pile is especially nice on a cool fall day. A happy pile is steaming warm at 130 to 150 degrees Fahrenheit and exudes the rich scent of soil. You can keep your compost pile in this state by turning its contents every three to six days and managing its exposure to air and water.

Control the air by limiting the size of materials that go into the bin. Chop them into pieces no larger than one inch with a garden machete on a hard surface, or with a weed whacker in an empty garbage can. If the inch-size pieces are too much of a challenge, just get the materials as small and bruised as you can, before mixing them into the pile.

Proper moisture is also critical. If the compost pile is overly saturated with water, the decomposition process changes to an oxygen-less, stinkier form of decay. Rather than dampen your “party” with bad smells, keep the compost contents “as moist as a wrung-out sponge.” Add water each time you turn the pile or add to its contents.

Keep a close eye on temperature. Turning a compost pile keeps the temperature up, and increases the chance of killing weed seeds. Compost thermometers are helpful tools and can be purchased at most hardware stores or online at www.gemplers.com Get in the habit of taking your compost’s temperature to help you know the right time for turning it. When the temperature peaks and starts to fall again, it’s time to get out the pitchfork and turn the pile. The warmer the compost pile, the sooner you will have a homemade soil amendment.