Composting turns yard trash into garden treasure

Yard waste and food scraps make up a significant portion of our garbage. Composting is a great way to reuse yard waste and reduce household waste, while creating a natural fertilizer for your garden.

Composting is the controlled decomposition of organic material by microorganisms such as bacteria and fungi along with worms and other living things. The end result is humus—black gold to gardeners.

Why compost? Composting is easy and creates a useful, beneficial soil amendment. Compost adds nutrients to the soil and promotes soil fertility. Compost improves the water holding capacity of our typically sandy soil. Compost helps to loosen compacted soils and improves aeration. But, more importantly, it is an environmentally sound way of reducing yard waste.

There are many ways to compost waste. Some methods need a backyard but others can be used by apartment dwellers. The method of composting you choose will depend on whether you plan to compost yard waste, kitchen waste or both, how much money and time you wish to spend, how much room you have and how soon you need the compost.

For more information on how to construct a home compost unit, review the online UF/IFAS publication at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HE026 or call your local Extension Office.

For those without a lot of space, vermicomposting is a great way to make compost. Vermicomposting relies on worms to digest food scraps, paper and vegetation. In the process the worms leave behind castings that form a high-quality soil amendment. The type of worm used is important. Red worms or manure worms are employed instead of the common soil-dwelling earthworms.

Composting is a natural and flexible process. It will take place under a wide range of conditions and methods regardless of the amount of time we spend managing it. In other words, compost happens.

Nevertheless, good management helps the process along and minimizes nuisances. Management determines how soon the compost is produced. For example, turning compost weekly can yield compost in a couple of months with adequate moisture content and a good combination of materials. Without turning,
composting may take 6 months to 2 years. You can make excellent quality compost either way.

Almost all natural organic materials will decompose, but not everything belongs in the backyard compost pile. Generally, you can compost garden vegetation, landscape trimmings and most plant-derived food scraps without concern.

Among the compostable organic materials close to home are leaves, grass clippings, small twigs, pine straw, vegetable/fruit peelings and coffee grounds from the kitchen.

It is, however, prudent to avoid composting plants harboring disease or treated with persistent herbicides or weeds that carry seeds.

Compost can be used in a variety of ways. However, due to the fine texture of most compost, it is best used as a soil amendment rather than mulch. A soil amendment is a material that is mixed with the soil prior to planting.

Another way to use compost is to make compost tea. Compost is typically placed into a burlap bag and inserted into a bucket of water. The nutrient rich tea is then used to water plants or the garden.

But no matter how you make it or use it, composting is a Florida-friendly practice. Avoid sending organic material to the landfill and use it in your own backyard.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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