The Rotten World of Composting

Use compost! Putting compost on your garden is like treating your plants to a gourmet meal. Not only is it an excellent soil conditioner and mulch, but it is also a wonderful slow-release fertilizer for the long term health of your plants. Adding compost to sandy soil will help hold moisture and nutrients; adding compost to heavy or clay soil will improve the drainage.

Common yard waste such as leaves and grass, coffee grounds, salad scraps, egg shells, old flowers, and small trimmings from shrubs and other plants can be composted. Short grass clippings can be left on the lawn to compost in place and nurture the lawn. Cow, horse, llama, chicken, or rabbit manure will add nitrogen to the pile, as will grass clippings. Elephant doo is supposed to be the best, but do be careful when collecting it. If added directly around your plants without composting, these manures are too strong and can actually burn your plant roots. If your pile starts to stink or smell like ammonia, you have too much nitrogenous material and some brown material such as dead leaves, stalks, or some sawdust should be added. You may also have a pile that is too wet or compacted--cut back on the watering and turn the pile. An ideal ratio of 30 parts of carbon material to 1 part nitrogenous material will result in ideal composting conditions leading to interior temperatures that may reach 130 to 150 degrees F.

Besides nitrogenous material the busy little micro-organisms that break down organic material in your pile need oxygen and water to do their job most efficiently. Oxygen is provided by turning the pile over every two weeks or even more frequently--some garden catalogs sell long handled tools to poke holes in your pile and add oxygen. Water your compost pile, but do not drown it; it should be as moist as a damp sponge. Compost stimulators or activators are a waste of money--they contain micro-organisms which are supposed to increase the rate of decomposition, but the organic materials you add to your pile are covered with friendly and active molds and bacteria which will do the job all by themselves. Another way to hurry up the decomposition is to use smaller pieces of plant material (less than 2 inches in diameter). I use a lawn mower to chop up all of my leaves, (and as many as I can get from my neighbors).

Don't put human, dog or cat litter or waste into your pile; such manures can contain parasites and diseases that are harmful. Don't use whole eggs, milk products, meat scraps, bones, or oils as these can attract rats and other vermin, and they take a long time to decompose. Do not use diseased plants, insect infested plant materials, or weed seeds since compost piles seldom get hot enough to destroy the pathogens and seeds.

The compost area can be as simple as a pile in the back yard or pallets fastened together. A good size for a pile or structure is about 5x5x5 feet; it is large enough to heat up, but not so large as to prevent air circulation to your pile. I have seen some multi-bin compost piles that are beautiful, a plus to the landscape, and a positive reflection on the woodworking skills and craftsmanship of the owner.

Adding lime or wood ashes to the pile is not recommended since these materials can increase the alkalinity of the finished compost. Our soils here in the Twin Cities are derived from a limestone base and are usually alkaline enough. A small amount of dissolved lime will be added to the pile when watering because it is in our tap water. Lime and wood ashes can also release valuable Nitrogen fertilizer from your pile. For more excellent information on composting, consult: www.extension.umn.edu, and search for composting.

Keep those organic materials out of the landfill; use them in your garden instead!

Happy Gardening,
Joe Baltrukonis