

COMPOST

NOTES

VOLUME 10 • NUMBER 1

Dear Composters

Dear Composters:

The spring flowers should be blooming by the time you receive this newsletter, and soon you'll be mowing the lawn again. With global warming and rising gas prices perhaps it's time to convert some of that turf into something more environmentally friendly. My wife and I have been slowly shrinking our lawn for a number of years. I've planted trees, shrubs, and blueberries. My wife is an enthusiastic flower gardener, so we've added many new planting beds where grass once grew. We find tending a variety of plants much more rewarding than the monotonous chore of mowing grass. All this gardening requires lots of compost, but I find making compost rewarding too.

Cheers,

Kevin Mathers, Resource Educator

Phone: (607) 772-8954, extension 130

e-mail: kjm8@cornell.edu

Web site: counties.cce.cornell.edu/broome

Ask Dr. Compost



My compost pile never seems to get hot. Is that a problem?

Getting your compost bin or pile to heat up isn't always easy, and it's certainly not necessary. Hot composting takes some planning along with the proper materials. It requires enough materials to fill a compost bin or to make a pile about three feet cubed. You also need the right combination of materials to provide a carbon to nitrogen ratio of roughly 30:1. It can be a challenge to gather enough nitrogen-rich material like fresh garden waste, food scraps, or grass clippings to add to your mix. Once you have a batch of hot compost you will need to turn the contents in order to maintain the rapid decomposition as long as possible. The hot composting method does have its benefits. It produces finished compost quicker, kills many weed seeds, and is less likely to attract unwanted pests.

The majority of home composters I speak with practice a form of composting that is often referred to as cool composting. Materials are added to the bin in layers as you generate them. This slower method of making compost works fine as long as you follow some basic composting guidelines. It works best if you alternate layers of dryer carbon-rich "brown" materials like leaves, straw, or wood shavings with moist nitrogen-rich materials like food scraps or grass clippings. Always immediately cover layers of fruit and vegetable scraps with a layer of brown material to suppress food odors and discourage pests from raiding your bin. One drawback of this method is that materials at the top of the bin in the early stages of composting cover the finished compost at the bottom of the bin. To get at the finished compost you need a bin with bottom doors, or you will need to remove the partially decomposed materials on top. Some people solve this dilemma by using two bins. After filling one bin they leave it so the contents can completely break down. Here are some other tips:

- Start the bin or pile with a layer of flower stems, small twigs, or coarse wood chips. This will help air move through your compost.
- Layers of food scraps, grass clippings or other wet materials should be thin - no more than 1 to 2 inches thick.
- Brown layers should be saucer shaped, lower in the center and higher on the edges to completely contain food scraps.
- Use a compost turning tool to loosen up compacted compost and promote better airflow in your compost pile.

The compost education program at Cornell Cooperative Extension in Tompkins County has developed a very informative fact sheet on cool composting called "Lasagna Composting". You can access it at: <http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/tompkins/compost/downloads.htm>. If you'd like a hard copy of the fact sheet give us a call.



Cornell Cooperative Extension
Broome County

840 Upper Front Street
Binghamton, New York 13905-1500
t. 607.772.8953
f. 607.723.5951
counties.cce.cornell.edu/broome



When Grass Gets Too High

It's usually best to leave grass clippings on the lawn. As they break down they add nutrients and organic matter to the soil, and they do not contribute to thatch build up. But, but what if the lawn gets way ahead of you? If the grass is so high the clippings would smother the lawn you'll need to put the bagging attachment on your mower or rake them up. Once you've collected the clippings you have several options for dealing with them. The clippings can be composted by adding them to your bin in layers no more than 2 inches thick. Alternate the layers of grass clippings with layers of brown material like leaves, straw, or wood shavings. You can also thoroughly mix the clippings with the contents of your bin, but don't add more than one third grass clippings by volume to the existing compost.

Grass clippings make good mulch in vegetable gardens. A one to two inch layer of grass clippings helps suppress weeds and conserve moisture. This is an excellent way to use large quantities of clippings. A variation of the mulching method called sheet composting (*see below*) is another way to environmentally manage lots of clippings.



Try Sheet Composting

Sheet composting is an excellent method for creating a new planting bed or renovating the soil in an existing bed. This method uses up large amounts of organic material and helps boost the earthworm population.

- If covering lawn, mow the area as low as possible, then place a thick layer of news paper or corrugated cardboard over the entire area.
- Spread a layer of shredded leaves or straw, rotted manure, or chopped garden trimmings over the paper or cardboard. You can use any mixture of these, or similar materials.
- Sprinkle and mix in a nitrogen-rich organic fertilizer like alfalfa meal, blood meal, or cottonseed meal. If you have grass clippings you can mix them in as a source of nitrogen.
- Add additional layers of organic materials if you have them. Adding nitrogen fertilizer or grass clippings to leaves or straw will help speed up the decay process.
- Be patient. It usually takes a year or more for the material to break down enough so you can start using the planting bed.



Upcoming events

Earth Fest 2007 at the Broome Community College Ice Rink.

April 28, 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. *Features environmental exhibits, music, free tree seedlings, and more.*

Plant Your Own Flower Bag. May 22, 6-7:30 p.m.

\$16.00 per person. Cornell Cooperative Extension of Broome County
Call 772-8954, x 150 to register. *Class limited to 20 participants*

Plant Sale. June 2, 9 a.m. – 12:00 Noon

Held in the auditorium at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Broome County.

Successful Home Composting. June 7, 6:30 p.m.

A free hands-on composting workshop at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Broome County. Call (607) 584-5013 for information.

*If you'd prefer to receive this newsletter as a pdf file please email us a request.
Thanks.*

Funding for this newsletter provided by the Broome County Division of Solid Waste Management and the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation.



Printed on 100% post-consumer recycled paper.