Compost is a great tool for gardeners

It’s no secret that successful gardening starts with good soil, although having a green thumb doesn’t hurt anything. For many gardeners, finding good soil isn’t necessarily just a turn of the shovel. Adding organic material like compost to your garden beds is a great way to give plants a helping hand.

What exactly is compost? Compost is a natural material formed from the decomposition of organic materials such as leaves, grass clippings, vegetation, vegetable food scraps and twigs. Bacteria, worms, fungi and insects need water and air to use the organic materials as food and decompose them.

Don’t worry about making anything fancy. A compost system simply can be a heap or pile, which is turned occasionally during the year. A more structured and complex system requires containers, more turning and produces finished compost in a few months. In compost piles, water is added to green and brown vegetation layers.

As decomposed plant material, compost is an excellent soil amendment. Compost can loosen clay soils, help sandy soil retain moisture and nutrients, as well as retain soil moisture when used as mulch. Beneficial bacteria and organisms in compost assist plants in absorbing nutrients. Thus, natural materials are recycled in a home yard environment.

So, how do you make compost? Organic materials are placed in alternating green (wet) and brown (dry) layers in a container, bin or pile. Alternating green and brown vegetable matter helps assure the correct carbon and nitrogen amounts. With water and air, bacteria and insects use the materials as a food and energy source. The bacteria need water to live and grow. This process generates heat from 140 to 160 degrees Fahrenheit. Aeration is done by turning the container or pile of material. The more turning, the more air the bacteria have available, which speeds up the process. When the temperature decreases, the material turns dark, the material crumbles easily and there is no odor, the process is complete.

The time of completion will vary according to the type and amount of materials used, the climate, the size and type of bin or pile used and the amount of aeration or turning of the pile. With the correct carbon-to-nitrogen ratio, water and air, compost should be ready to use in about four to six months. If the pile is turned more frequently, the compost should be ready more quickly. The smaller the individual pieces of material in the pile, the more surface area the microorganisms have to work on and the faster the materials will decompose. Shredding or chipping branches decreases the decomposition time.
Most yard waste such as grass clippings, leaves, twigs and excess vegetation can be used in a compost pile. Food scraps that don’t contain fat, as well as coffee grounds and tea leaves also can be used. Don’t use large branches, fatty foods, dairy products, fish, bones, pet or human waste, plastics or diseased vegetative matter.

Making compost is a great way to reduce the material going into landfills. It also can help reduce the amount of needed chemical fertilizer.

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