



Johnson's Garden Talk

Lawn and garden information for the friends and customers of Johnson's Garden Centers

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Compost Happens

Wes Hostetler, *Johnson's East Store Manager*

Whether you want it to or not ... like death and taxes ... and at the rate the circumstances dictate ... compost will happen. And although all organic matter will eventually decompose, the trick is to get your compost pile to decompose as fast as you can fill it, so you can work this "black gold" back into your garden.

The Elements Of Making Compost

The rate at which breakdown occurs depends on several factors—oxygenation, temperature, water content, particulate surface area (small chips decompose faster) and the carbon/nitrogen ratio. Composting is more of an art than a rigid science and at times can require a bit of finesse and skill. Keeping that in mind, there are several things you can do to affect your composting rate.

Oxygenation—increase oxygen levels by providing ventilation and by turning or mixing your pile.

Temperature—for best results, maintain your pile at 90-135°F. If the temp falls below this, decomposition will slow down—not stop, just slow down.

Water Content—needs to be around 50% (like a damp towel). Overly wet piles smell bad, and if it's too dry that slows down the process. Add non-chlorine water, as chlorine kills your good organisms.

Surface Area—can be maximized by shredding or chipping all waste into small pieces. The more area you expose to micro-organisms the faster the decomposition.

Carbon/Nitrogen Ratio—the mixing of one part greens to three parts browns is essential. Examples of greens are fruit and vegetable scraps, grass clippings and horse manure. Browns include ingredients like hay, twigs, leaves, shredded newspaper, etc.

Dos and Don'ts Of Compost Materials

When filling your composter, it is essential to layer, layer, layer! Remember that browns are fluffy and will be a thicker layer than the greens. Soil is also a key ingredient as you do your layering because it adds the living organisms and gives you a quicker start. Use Cotton Boll Compost in place of soil and you will have even more living organisms. Compost Maker is another product we offer to aid in jump starting your compost pile. Compost Maker is loaded with microorganisms that will get your breakdown action going.

Do not use greasy foods, dairy products, meat scraps, bones, human feces or pet feces (can harbor harmful bacteria).

Composters

Composters can be made from almost anything and can be any size or shape.

Here at Johnson's Garden Centers we currently carry two composter styles. The top-of-the-line Mantis ComposTwin has two 10-bushel bins. It sets on a frame, high enough to put your wheelbarrow under to dump the mix. The crank handle is easy to turn and makes mixing very easy. We also have the Easy Composter, a one-piece black polyethylene composter. Its design provides ventilation, flexibility and heat absorption. When not in use it rolls up for easy storage.

For all your composting needs and "how to" information, come see us at Johnson's Garden Centers. ■