Make Your Own Compost

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Compost happens when we recycle leaves and other organic material in our landscapes.

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There is an old saying among gardeners – compost happens! Did you ever stop to think what would become of fallen leaves left beneath a tree if they did not decompose naturally? We would be neck-deep in leaves! Just as with making chili, there are many recipes for making compost – some hot, some mild.

Composting is free and easy to do. We built a 4 foot square homemade compost bin made of welded wire fencing that we attached to the two fences that meet in the back corner of our yard. One side of the welded wire fencing swings open from a fence post. Here is my recipe for compost:

1. Keep a covered container by the kitchen sink for vegetable scraps, egg shells, coffee grounds. Do not compost meat scraps.
2. Loosen the ground of the compost area to expose soil organisms and to provide drainage.
3. Throw in a layer of kitchen scraps whenever the kitchen container is full. This provides a nitrogen source. You could also use grass clippings or chopped up garden clippings.
4. Cover scraps with a layer of leaves. This provides a source of carbon. It is difficult for microbes to digest carbon without sufficient nitrogen; that is why layering the dried leaves with the green veggie scraps is efficient.
5. Periodically layer in a shovel full of soil, which naturally contains the microbes that do all the work for you.
6. Sometimes I just throw the scraps on top and then pitchfork soil and compost from the bottom onto the top of the pile, especially when leaves are scarce.
7. We add dolomite lime occasionally. Ashes from the fireplace provide potassium.

There are a few things you can do to make the pile heat up to produce compost faster. Add manure or other organic fertilizer to increase nitrogen, turn the pile to increase oxygen, chop or shred leaves or garden clippings to increase surface area of material and water lightly during drought.

The City of Tallahassee sells plastic compost bins at cost every so often to encourage residents to compost rather than send valuable food scraps and leaves to the landfill. There are also more expensive tumbler-type models available that make turning your compost a snap. If you have an enclosed compost bin, remember to add some soil from your yard occasionally to provide the microbes. It seems that lots of folks forget to do this.

Remember, compost happens. My sister deposits her collected vegetable scraps directly into the soil of various beds in her yard. This works for her, since the children are all grown and she and her husband don’t produce many scraps.

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