

Backyard Composting

Organic Materials make up about 25% of the composition of municipal solid waste from residential communities disposed of at the county landfill. Backyard Composting, Worm Composting, Grasscycling, and Yard Waste management are just a few ways to reduce, reuse and recycle organic materials and save landfill space.

Backyard Composting - Nature's Recycling Process

Backyard composting is a way to create "black gold" a natural soil amendment while improving the environment and saving valuable landfill space. Instead of bagging and dragging yard waste and kitchen scraps to the curb for trash collection they can be combined in a natural decomposition process recycling valuable nutrients back to the soil. Every time you throw something away in Burlington County you are adding to the tons of waste that are taken in every year to the landfill.

If everyone started composting that could reduce the amount of waste by almost one third while cutting back on fertilizers and soil amendments purchased annually. Using compost to condition your soil also reduces the harmful over use and runoff of chemical fertilizers into local streams and bodies of water. Over abundance of phosphates and nitrates from chemical fertilizers disturbs the aquatic environment by causing an over growth of algae which deplete the oxygen in the water resulting in death for fish and other aquatic creatures.

Every gardener knows that the best way to have healthy plants is to condition the soil and all soil types can benefit from the addition of compost. It will improve the texture and moisture holding capacity of sandy soils. Clay soils mixed with compost will become more friable with improved drainage qualities. Compost provides a natural source of nutrients plants need to maintain health and resist pests and disease.

Composting is certainly not a new concept. Early agrarian societies discovered the benefits of compost to grow healthy and abundant food crops. Ancient and modern methods all channel the same natural process of decomposition, recycling nutrients back to the soil in a usable form for plants. Without this process life would cease to exist. Take a walk in a forest or maybe even in your own backyard to see evidence of nature recycling dead and decaying vegetation into dark, rich, earthy compost. Understanding how compost is formed helps us to manage the process and get a free soil amendment from what could have been disposed of as waste.

The great thing is that compost happens with or without our help which means that it fits nicely into almost any life style. Careful attention and the right ingredients can produce results in five to fifteen weeks but even with minimal

attention yard waste and kitchen scraps will naturally result in compost within twelve to eighteen months if bin or pile is situated where it will get moisture from rain.

There are five main elements of a compost pile: browns, greens, organisms, air and water. Greens are higher in nitrogen than carbon, usually moist and often, but not always, green. These materials include grass clippings, weeds, flowers, vegetative kitchen scraps, coffee grinds with filter, tea bags, and egg shells (rinsed and crushed). Brown materials are higher in carbon, usually dry and include leaves, dried plant material/ stalks, sawdust, chipped twigs and branches and shredded paper. Never compost meat or dairy products, no manure from meat eating animals such as dogs and cats waste, no oils, grease, sauces or soap residue, no diseased or poisonous plants or weeds with seeds.

Begin the compost process by adding layers of green material and brown material in a compost bin or pile. The size of the pile should be an average of three to five cubic feet. A pile that is too small will take longer and a pile that is too big and difficult to turn can cause odors because air can not reach the center. Too much brown material may slow the process and too much green material will cause odors. Use what you have available and make sure to keep a stock pile of browns to add with every addition of kitchen scraps and green yard waste. The organisms will naturally work their way up into the pile from the ground since you are providing a food source for them, so if you build it they will come.

A shovel full of soil will introduce organisms to bins that are off the surface or serve as a source of browns to cover kitchen scraps. Remember, the compost pile is a living environment for the organisms that are decomposing the materials into compost and they need air and water like all living things. The pile should be kept moist like a damp sponge but not too wet. Layering greens and browns will eliminate the need to turn the pile to get air to the organisms. Every time you add green material cover it with an addition of dry browns. This will provide the necessary air space and keep away gnats and other unwanted critters.

The compost process will take place in an open pile or bin to keep the process contained and help control the conditions needed for faster decomposition. There are numerous varieties of bins that can be purchased or constructed with supplies like wire, wood pallets or plastic lumber. A simple web search will result in a myriad of choices for purchase or plans for homemade bins.

Finished compost can be used as mulch to reduce weeds, retain moisture and prevent erosion while adding a natural source of nutrients to the soil. Compost serves as a soil conditioner returning organic matter to the soil in a usable form for plants while improving the texture.

A soil test should always be done before making any major changes to your garden or if you are starting a new garden area. Soil test kits can be purchased for a minimal fee through Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Burlington County. Call 609-265-5050 for more information or visit www.mgburlington.org .

So as you rake those leaves and clean out your gardens, don't bag and drag that waste to the curb. Try backyard composting and make your own "black gold" while saving landfill space and tax dollars.

For more information on Backyard Composting and dates for workshops call 609-499-1001 x271 or email recycle@co.burlington.nj.us