

Fact sheet

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Backyard Leaf Composting

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Many New Jersey homeowners have an excessive quantity of leaves in the fall. One alternative for dealing with leaves is backyard composting. This process involves primarily the microbial decomposition of organic matter. Compost - the end result - is a dark, friable, partially decomposed substance similar to natural organic matter found in the soil.

The Composting Process

Composting speeds natural decomposition under semi-controlled conditions. Raw organic materials can be converted into compost by microorganisms. As microorganisms decompose organic matter, temperatures within the pile increase, sometimes approaching 150 degrees F. at the center. These inside-pile temperatures speed the process, and kill many weed and disease organisms.

Leaves may be composted by piling them in a heap. Locate the pile where drainage is adequate and there is no standing water. The composting pile should be damp enough that when a sample taken from the interior is squeezed by hand a few drops of water will appear. A shaded area will reduce moisture evaporation from the surface, but tree roots may grow into the pile. If the surface of the pile becomes excessively dry, it will not compost, and those leaves may blow away.

The leaf pile should be at least 4 feet in diameter and 3 feet in height. If it is too small, it is difficult to maintain adequate temperatures for rapid decomposition. The maximum size should be about 5 feet in height and 10 feet in diameter. If the pile is too large, the interior will not obtain the oxygen needed for adequate, odor-free decomposition. If more material is available, lengthen the pile into a rectangular shape while keeping it 10 feet wide and 5 feet high. If there is sufficient space and material, two or three piles will provide greater flexibility. One pile can contain compost for immediate use; the second is actively composting; and the

third receives newly fallen leaves. If there is space for only one pile, new material may be added gradually to the top while removing the decomposed product from the bottom.

Containing the Pile

Composting may be done in a loose pile. However, for the most efficient use of space, it can be contained in a bin or other enclosure. The sides of this bin should be loose enough to permit air movement. One side should be open, or easily opened, for turning the pile and for removing the finished compost.

Woven wire or wooden slat fencing, or cement blocks on their sides have been used successfully. Wood gradually decomposes, and wire fencing may rust, so these materials will need periodic replacement. Wooden stakes driven into the ground may attract termites, so lumber treated with wood preservative or metal snow-fence posts may be better.

Constructing the Pile

Many instruction sheets advocate constructing the pile in layers that may include grass clippings, fertilizer, limestone, manure, soil, and leaves. However, we have found this practice to be unnecessary. The pile can be constructed of leaves only. A small amount of grass clippings may be added to the leaves as the pile is being constructed. However, because of its high demand for oxygen, too much grass tends to cause an anaerobic (without oxygen) condition. This greatly reduces the composting rate, and can produce unpleasant odors. Fresh vegetable peelings may be included, but do not add meat or grease because they may cause odors or attract pests.

Unless leaves are collected in a very wet condition, add water while placing them in the pile. Without moisture, the microorganisms will not function. Moist-en to the point



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where it is possible to squeeze droplets of water from a hand-held mass of leaves.

Dead leaves lack adequate nitrogen for rapid decomposition. Therefore, a high-nitrogen fertilizer added to the pile may speed up decomposition. However, since leaves fall only for about 2 months a year, there are 10 months for decomposition before space is needed for the next batch. So, while it is generally unnecessary to add fertilizer, for more rapid decomposition and a product with a higher nutritive content, 5 ounces (about 1/2 cup) of 10% nitrogen fertilizer per 20-gallon can of hand-compacted leaves could be added. Fresh manure could be substituted, but it may cause odor problems.

Ordinarily it is unnecessary to add ground limestone because the pile seldom becomes too acidic. If fertilizer has been added, an equivalent quantity of limestone will counteract any acidity. Little or no limestone should be added if the compost is to be used on acid-loving plants.

Some guides on leaf composting recommend adding layers of soil periodically to the piles to supply the microorganisms needed for decomposition. We have not found this practice to be necessary, because leaves, themselves, contain a multitude of microorganisms. Available commercial activators or starters definitely are not needed.

Avoid packing the materials too tightly. Too much compaction will limit movement of air through the pile. Shredding the leaves generally speeds up composting.

To reduce weed germination, weeds in flower or with seeds should not be composted. Also, it is best to avoid composting diseased plants, or herbicide-treated lawn clippings until after at least three mowings.

Care of the Pile

The composting pile must be kept moist, but not soggy, for proper decomposition. Inadequate moisture reduces microbial activity, while excessive water may cause anaerobic conditions. A thin outer layer of dry leaves is unavoidable.

The pile should be periodically turned or mixed. The main objectives of turning are to shift materials from the outer parts of the pile closer to the center for better decomposition, and to incorporate oxygen. During warm weather, turn the pile once a month. In cool weather frequent turning is not recommended because it allows too much heat to escape. Piles should be turned immediately if ammonia or other offensive odors are detected. If space is available, turning may be accomplished by shifting the entire pile to an adjacent area or bin.

Within a few weeks after starting, the pile should be hot in the center. Heating generally indicates that the pile is decomposing properly. Failure to heat may be caused by too little or too much water, improper aeration, packing too tightly, or a pile that is too small. As leaves decompose, they should shrink to less than one-half of their original volume. During dry weather it may be necessary to add more water. The moisture content of the interior of the pile should be observed while turning.

Using Leaf Compost

Finished compost should be dark and crumbly with much of the original appearance no longer visible. It should have an earthy odor. Normally, compost will be ready in 4-9 months.

The major horticultural use for leaf compost is to improve the organic content of soil. Most New Jersey soils need an increase of 1/2 to 1% in organic content, particularly to improve moisture-holding capacity and tilth. Leaf compost is not normally a fertilizer, because it is too low in nutrients. Compost serves primarily as an organic amendment and as a soil conditioner. Soil mulch is another valuable use for leaf compost.

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