

Why wait to start composting?

By Irene Chwalkowski, The Suburban 2008-05-21

Concern about global warming is making people increasingly think about ways to reduce their environmental footprint on the planet.

An easy way to make a difference is to start composting.

Composting, the aerobic decomposition of biodegradable organic matter, reduces waste that would otherwise go to landfills.

It reduces pollution, lowers waste collection and disposal costs, limits greenhouse gases, and creates a product that enriches lawns and gardens.

Composting is a free and natural alternative to synthetic chemicals and fertilizers.

For many people, the process of composting is a mystery. But it is a common practice for others.

"This practice is old hat for farmers," said Sylvia Oljemark, spokesperson for the Green Coalition.

She remembers her father composting 50 years ago at their home in Saraguay, Quebec, depositing organic matter straight into trenches in the ground.

He would start at one end of the garden, turning over soil and compost in lines so that after a few years the whole garden would be fed.

Oljemark and her family have continued to compost. "The garbage that leaves our home every week is just a wee bag," she said. The family composts during the winter as well.

Composting is a natural process through which organic materials break down into a rich, soil like material called humus.

Composting doesn't take a lot of technical knowledge since it is almost impossible to stop things from composting. The goal is to control the conditions and speed up the process.

Two types of materials are used for composting — green nitrogen sources and brown carbon sources.

Green nitrogen sources include kitchen scraps such as fruit and vegetable peelings, coffee grounds, paper filters, tea leaves and tea bags.

Brown carbon sources include bread, cotton rags, rope, untreated dry grass, dry leaves, peanut shells, sawdust, pine needles, peat moss, wheat bran, wood chips and sawdust from untreated wood, and woody yard waste.

Meat or dairy products should not be used.

A perfect mixture of material should be equal amounts by weight of brown material and green material.

Air is essential for the organisms that live inside your compost bin to survive.

Therefore the pile should be mixed or turned three to five times per season using a pitchfork, shovel or garden hoe.

If the compost smells of ammonia, your bin is not getting enough oxygen.

The organisms also need water to survive, but too much water will drown them. Your compost pile should have the texture of a wrung out sponge.

The larger the surface area of your compost pile, the better the organisms digest material, multiply faster and generate more heat.

The pile should be large enough to hold the heat in, but small enough to let air into the centre.

For home composting, it is recommended that the pile or bin should be between three feet cubed and five feet cubed, and there is no need to add worms or bugs to the pile as they will come naturally. The hotter the pile, the faster the composting, and hot compost piles also help to avoid pest problems, kill plant pathogens and destroy weed seeds. The pile should peak between 50-70 degrees C about four to seven days after making the pile. Compost thermometers are available.

In 1998, the province of Quebec set a goal for municipalities to recycle 60 percent of recyclable materials and compost 60 percent of organic material by this year, hoping that this will drastically reduce the volume of waste going to landfill sites.

But we've failed to meet that goal. By 2006, Montreal was only recycling 37 percent and composting seven percent of organic materials.

Many municipalities are making it easier for residents to compost, selling compost bins, starting curbside collection and building public awareness campaigns.

So if you haven't already started composting, why wait?

It's easy, and it's the right thing to do.

The information in this article was supplied by the Compost Action Project, a service of Resource Conservation Manitoba. For more information, go to www.resourceconservation.mb.ca.

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