

DIG THIS by Peg Tillery (for 4-17-09) Spring is Time to Start Composting © 2009

What do you do in the spring when you're out pruning and cleaning up all the detritus from winter and maybe even left over from autumn? Compost of course!

Composting can be as simple as finding a place to pile up all the woody debris and green stuff. This method is called passive composting or cold composting. For esthetics choose a spot behind shrubbery or screen with vegetation or a decorative fenced area. Eventually the pile decomposes and returns to the earth as humus.

Another very simple way to compost is by digging smaller clippings and trimmings into the soil directly around plants. When deadheading plants bury the plant parts in the soil around and between plantings. Don't bury weeds with seeds though.

If you have room on your property pick a shady area in the woods, pile up weedy vegetative debris to make a large pile, water it well and cover it up with a tarp for several months or even longer. The pile will slowly decompose and the shade prevents reseeding. Make sure you aren't using this method too close to tree root zones to avoid smothering the tree roots.

Hot composting happens over several weeks or longer (depending on the heat and water conditions) and entails turning the piles (usually three feet by three feet by three feet). This method works well in a three-bin system. An unconfined pile about three feet tall and several feet wide, turned frequently, works well too.

If you live in an area with raccoons, bears or other animals do not compost food items, use worm bins instead. Do compost: browns (dried leaves, shredded white paper, shredded newspaper, wood chips, straw); greens (fresh cut grass, flowers, garden clippings, seedless annual weeds, vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, tea leaves, fruits, herbivore manures). Don't compost: glossy paper, junk mail, magazines, colored paper (the browns) or diseased plants, weeds with seeds, invasive weeds and roots, cooked foods, dairy products, fatty foods, meat, poultry, fish, pet wastes (the greens). When in doubt call the Master Gardener/Master Composter Hotline at 360-337-7158.

Compost adds tilth to the soil and provides a blanket for plants' roots. It also adds readily absorbable amounts of nitrogen and nutrients for plants to use. The mycorrhizae produced in composting help increase the number of pores in the soil for better water circulation and aids in a healthier growing environment. Building healthy soil helps reduce runoff, erosion and pollution in the environment. Even when weeds crop up in composted areas of gardens they're easier to pull out.

Worm composting (vermicomposting) can be accomplished using a wide variety of containers. Master Composter Becky Croston created a three tiered system using rubber tubs. Visit [http://kitsap.wsu.edu/hort/worm\\_bin.htm](http://kitsap.wsu.edu/hort/worm_bin.htm) for instructions or call 360-337-7158 for a printed copy of the instructions. Kitsap EZ Earth, 16953 Clear Creek Road, Poulsbo has a worm bin stacking system for sale plus supplies of worms and other vermicompost

products. Visit the website at <http://kitsapezeearth.com/wp/> or call 360-340-2187. Kingston Worm Farm [www.kingstonwormfarm.com](http://www.kingstonwormfarm.com) 360-397-7280 (by appointment) is also another resource for worms and vermicompost products.

What about larger woody debris? Some gardeners have lots of trees and shrubs to prune and clean up, along with limbs and branches on a fairly regular basis. The answer is chipping and shredding to create homemade arborist chips for mulching gardens or use on paths. This woody debris eventually decomposes into good rich soil.

When spreading mulch or compost avoid applying too thickly (use only one or two inches thick). Keep mulch and compost away from woody bark or stems of plants. Leave an open area around the base of the plants. If mulch or compost is too deep or too close to the stems and bark areas it can smother the plants and/or create an environment for disease.

Compost tea is also a way of using compost. Google "compost tea" for information pro and con. Visit reputable sites, then decide for yourself. If you do purchase compost tea make sure it's been brewed properly and has a certificate saying what's in the mixture. Compost teas are fungal or bacterial based. Some plants cannot tolerate fungal based teas and others cannot tolerate bacterial based teas. Consult with the supplier to see which is best for your plants. Compost tea has a short shelf life, ideally apply within hours of purchase. Use diluted or concentrated depending on intended use. Nursery staff will provide advice on using compost tea.

Visit Kitsap County Solid Waste <http://www.kitsapgov.com/sw/compost.htm> for abundant information on composting, to download "Down to Earth" and for a schedule of upcoming compost classes.

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