

WHY NOT LET IT ROT?

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Composting is a very personal choice to redirect waste from the landfill and instead, to add essential nutrients to the soil and feed our plants. Once the habit of composting is established, it is hard to imagine not composting.

The benefits are visible:

1. We reduce the waste leaving our homes for landfill. By diverting our vegetable and fruit scraps (nitrogen) and our paper and plant clippings (carbon) we amend the soil and return the nutrients to the soil completing a rich cycle of life. In addition, home composting promotes aerobic decomposition, reducing greenhouse gases. Landfill produces anaerobic, slow, decomposition adding greenhouse gases to our air.
2. We notice that there is less need for other amendments to the soil. All our healthy food scraps become a resource for minerals and nutrients growing plants need.
3. We save water because compost holds moisture in the soil.
4. Our plants are healthier. Composting increases the presence of beneficial bacteria, fungi, and insects to keep vitality in the soil.
5. We save money by needing less commercial amendments to the soil.
6. Best of all, we become more aware of our consumer habits that will benefit our planet (or not).
7. Our air is cleaner than when landfills create methane and hydrogen sulfide gases. (We are running out of space for our waste and organic waste accounts for 50% of waste in the landfill.)
8. Compost produces stable organic humus, an element of healthy, productive soil.
9. Composting contributes to complying with Assembly Bill # 341, which mandates the reduction of organic waste by 75 percent by 2020.
10. It feels good to be part of the solutions to what will be facing our descendants in years to come.

Composting can be done many ways:

“Rot is Hot” Method

Equal parts of organic materials called browns, which add nitrogen, come from dead leaves, twigs, cardboard, paper, straw, etc., and greens, which add carbon from grass clippings, coffee grounds, teas, manures, alfalfa, hay etc., are kept moist and mixed to produce a hot pile. With regular turning and mixing of browns and greens, bacteria, fungi and micro-organisms break down the matter into a rich brown stable humus. When the pile has reached a temperature of around 125 degrees, it will be ready to spread around the garden. It is important to keep the pile moist and turned which means turning twice a week until the pile is hot. There are various ways to build a compost pile to achieve this desired result.

“Rot is Cold” aka, The Slow Method

Essential to getting organics to decompose with the help of microorganisms, is moisture and turning. A slow method is to keep adding greens and browns while keeping the pile moist but maybe not mixing them as often or mixing them before you add them to your pile. The decomposition will take a lot longer and may not kill the weed seeds that fly into your pile, but for busy folks, a slow pile works to reap the benefits of composting, just taking longer.

Vermi-Composting or Worm Composting

This is a quick and easy way to compost vegetable, fruit scraps and other organic material in a closed system. The worms that work this magic are called red wigglers. Unlike earthworms, red wigglers feed on the surface and do not burrow in the soil. They require a dark, damp and aerated environment. They can eat about a pound of scraps a day and multiply rapidly. A well-kept worm box does not smell or attract vermin. The result of worm castings is a mineral and nutrient-rich fertilizer to be used as top dressing on plants, or a rich amendment to your soil. Another way to use it is to strain water through it to create compost tea which will fertilize your plants as you water them. There are many ways to make a worm bin. Unlike hot and slow methods mentioned above, worm composting does not produce humus. It is a fertilizer!

Where Can I Learn to Compost:

Watch for classes offered by the Amador Master Gardeners and Calaveras Master Gardeners to learn about these methods. In September, Amador MGs offers a class to the public on building healthy soil.

Come see Master Gardeners at the Amador County Fair! There will be demonstrations of composting methods at the Amador County Fair in July. For more on how to compost go to: <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8367.pdf>.

Yes, you do have to develop composting habits but the benefits to your garden and plants and most importantly, to our healthy planet, are worth it!

For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of Amador County website at <http://ucanr.edu/mgamador>. UCCE Master Gardeners of Amador County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Thursday, 10:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (209) 223-6838. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 12200-B Airport Rd. in Jackson. You can also find us on Facebook.