

Composting

Segment for Week of July 6, 2020

This is Steve Rulison bringing you information on shore friendly living and gardening from the Master Gardeners and Virginia Cooperative Extension and this week we are going to talk about composting.

Everyone who has a garden – regardless of size or location - should be making compost. You will be adding organic matter and nutrients to your soil, not sending plant waste to your septic or sewer system or to the landfill.

Adding compost to garden soil improves it in several ways. We should think of soil as a living entity as so many beneficial microorganisms live in it. Adding compost feeds your soil, whereas adding fertilizer feeds your plants. Compost also improves the texture of the soil. If your soil is sandy, the organic matter aggregates the particles; if your soil is clay, it separates the fine particles. In both cases, soil drainage is improved.

How much compost you will need depends on how large your garden is, how much time and effort you want to put in, and the sources of your composting materials. Composting waste vegetable matter from your kitchen can be done in a small container. If you plan to compost leaves from large trees you will need a larger space.

Where to put your compost pile depends on your space. A small movable container can fit anywhere; a larger pile should be open to the rain or close to a water source and close to where you intend to use the finished compost.

Composting is a year-round activity, but since it is best tilled into the garden in the fall, you should start in the spring or early summer. You may still have some remaining dead leaves to rake up which is good starter material. You will have more material over the summer and in the fall with leaves and all other plant remains from the end of the garden season.

The ideal compost pile will have a mixture of brown and green materials. The brown materials such as saw dust, straw, and leaves provide carbon. The green materials such as old vegetables and fruit, coffee grounds, and non-woody plant trimmings provide nitrogen. All of these materials should be plant based. Do not use animal matter such as bones, fish, cheese, eggs, or oily matter such as butter or oils. There are two exceptions; egg shells, and manure from plant eating animals.

In an ideal world, you should layer the different materials in your container until the microorganisms start to work, then turn them over with a fork. In the real world, you will probably add materials as you have them and not mix them. Either way works, you will have compost sooner with the first method, but the end product will be essentially the same.

From my perch near the mouth of Occohannock Creek, I recorded ___ inch of rain last week.

For information on soil testing, or answers to other Gardening questions, call your local Accomack or Northampton County Extension Office.

Written by By Janet Rochester