

NEWS RELEASE
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COMPOSTING GARDEN WASTE

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It is getting late in the summer vegetable growing season and many of our plants are beginning to, well, look a bit ratty. The corn has been harvested, the tomatoes are still producing but with the high temperatures over the last few weeks, their production may be down to a few struggling fruit. In any case, there is probably a lot of “green waste” being produced in your garden that should be composted. Many just cut up the green waste and throw it in a pile and let it sit for a year. While that is one way to compost, it isn’t very efficient because many of the nutrients that are so valuable in compost tend to leach out of the pile through the winter months. It also creates a haven for many undesirable critters like soldierfly larva and skunks, etc. As well, because the untended piles never really generate “heat” during the breakdown process, many pest type organisms don’t break down. For example, weed seeds will not be killed and neither will pathogenic fungi and bacteria.

A better way to deal with green waste is to actively compost using the “rapid composting system.” The rapid composting system can turn green waste into rich humus in a matter of 4-6 weeks. It does take more time in that the pile must be turned frequently. If you turn the pile every day, it will be compost in 4 weeks. If you turn it every 3 days, it will take six weeks. If you turn it once a week, it just takes longer and so on.

In order for the rapid compost system to be successful, it must contain the proper ratio of carbon to nitrogen. I like to think of this as the right ratio of dry stuff to green stuff. It usually works out to ½ green plant matter and ½ of the pile should be dry materials like dried leaves, straw, shredded newspapers, sawdust etc. The green waste can be any green plant material like spent zucchini plants, chopped corn stalks, weeds (as long as they haven’t gone to seed) or grass clippings. They should be mixed to form a pile that is approximately 3 x 3 x 3. You should accumulate the materials that you want to compost and then when you have enough, mix the materials together and then add nothing else to the pile once the composting process has begun. If you have more material to compost, then start a new pile.

The pile should be kept evenly moist but not wet and need not be covered. The materials best breakdown in full sun but if rodents are a problem, you can enclose the pile in a compost bin. The smaller the components to the compost pile are chopped up, again the faster they will breakdown with the ideal size being about ½ to 1 to 1-1/2 inch in size. Once you mix the materials, it should begin to heat up by the next day and ultimately heat up to about 160°F. If heat is not detected, then check the moisture content. It may be too dry or too wet. If after a time you detect a “bad” odor, it is likely the pile is too wet and anaerobic (without oxygen) decomposition is occurring. This isn’t good. Mix the pile up to aerate and try not to keep the pile so wet. A pile that is too dry will also not break down. The pile may need water every few days in warm weather.

There are some materials you don’t want to include in your compost pile. They include weed seeds, bones, fats, oils, animal feces from “meat eaters,” soil or wood ashes. Once the

materials in the pile have broken down, you can sift and use the compost in your garden or flower beds. If there are large chunks of undecomposed matter then just throw those into your next “pile” to continue the breakdown process.

For more information on composting go to the UC ANR webpage at <http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu> and download a free composting leaflet entitled “Compost in a Hurry”, #8037 or contact us as UC Cooperative Extension in Mariposa County (209)966-2417 or email us at mgmariposa@ucdavis.edu

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