



with **Growing**
the
Instant Organic Gardener

To compost or not to compost?

by Don Rosenberg

Many people who are considering starting a backyard garden ask me about building a compost pile as well. They've heard about the benefits of "black gold," as compost is often called, and want to find out if it's worth the time and trouble. I generally answer with a question of my own: "What do you want to use it for?"

Why compost?

In the South, compost is critical. It's added to the region's red clay to turn it into decent gardening soil. But existing clay has weed seeds that lay dormant for 20 to 50 years, just waiting to be exposed to sunlight to germinate. When compost and fertilizer are added to Carolina clay, you can end up with a weed patch instead of a productive garden.

For gardeners, I recommend using my system of raised beds and potting mix, so there's perfect soil from the start. My approach is called "Easy Growing" because people are so busy they don't have time to weed a garden patch, and there's usually limited space for large gardens. If using a raised bed of potting mix, then why go through all the effort of building a compost pile, adding layers of raw material, turning the pile every month or so, and then sifting the results?

Some people want to start a compost pile so they can use up yard waste instead of putting it into the local landfills (even though the city of Charlotte collects this material and has a very successful composting system, collecting limbs, brush, logs, leaves and grass clippings and selling the resulting compost at centers across the area).

Another reason to start a compost pile is to find a use for kitchen scraps, which end up in the garbage disposal and can't be left for pickup by the city. There's something very satisfying about taking these scraps and turning them into useful compost. But unless you have a large family and do a lot of cooking, the amount of material won't be enough to generate a lot of compost. There are new indoor systems that look like trash compactors and take kitchen scraps and slowly turn them over, generating finished compost in just a few weeks. The process is fun and interesting, but the systems cost more than \$200. There are also affordable worm-composting systems that can be used for kitchen scraps. These generate worm castings, which are fantastic for soil fertility, or they can generate a liquid product that is great for use as a fertilizer spray or additive when watering indoor or outdoor plants.

Turning trash into treasure

If you're still interested in a compost pile, now is a great time to get started. A compost pile needs green and brown material as sources of nitrogen and carbon. I suggest you collect very dry leaves in trash bags and set them aside. The green material can be grass clippings, chopped green leaves, garden refuse or kitchen scraps. Just make sure you don't use grass clippings with added weed killers, garden refuse from diseased plants, or kitchen scraps of meat, bones or dairy products. Also, never use animal waste of any kind.

Building a compost pile is simple; there are lots of systems described online. Just know that in order to get "hot" and neutralize diseases and weed seeds, the compost pile needs to be at least a 3-foot cube – 4- or 5-foot dimensions are better.

Start by crushing dried leaves or collecting them in a mulching mower bag – the smaller the pieces the faster they decompose. Layer the brown and green material and sprinkle in some garden soil or other finished compost to give the bacteria a boost, and make sure the pile is kept moist. At this time of year, kitchen scraps or even alfalfa meal (found at feed stores as rabbit food) can be used as the nitrogen source. Let the pile heat up for three to four weeks and then turn it over to mix the material from the outside so it can cook, too. Your compost pile should never smell bad. If it does, it probably doesn't have enough oxygen; matted leaves or thick layers of grass clippings are usually the problem.

So consider whether a compost pile is worth your family's efforts. If it is, enjoy the process of turning one man's trash into another man's treasure, right in your own backyard! □

Rosenberg, a regular Charlotte Weekly columnist, is the creator of the Instant Organic Garden. For more information or to read previous articles, visit www.InstantOrganicGarden.com. To ask Rosenberg a garden question, e-mail donrosenberg@gmail.com.

Rosenberg will give a free talk on organic gardening made easy on Saturday, Nov. 15, 11 a.m.-noon, at the Healthy Home Market Community room, 2707 South Blvd. Call 704-522-8123 to register. He also will speak about "Starting Your First Vegetable Garden" on Saturday, Nov. 22, 10:15-11:15 a.m. at the Carolina Living Green Expo at the Cabarrus Arena & Events Center, 4751 Highway 49 North, Concord.