

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post

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Composting is a continual cycle of life, death and rebirth that has been going on since the beginning of time. Its nature's way of recycling organic matter and the process can be found in lawns, gardens, fields and forests.

Organic gardeners use this decaying organic matter or compost to feed their soil. As this matter decays, nutrients are changed to a form that plants can absorb. The finished product is a rich, dark, crumbly substance called humus. It is rich in nitrogen and also makes phosphorus and potassium available for plant use. Nutrients are gradually released into the soil. Humus creates large pore spaces in our heavy clay soil found in this region. This helps with drainage and allows nutrients and oxygen to channel down to the root zone where needed. In sandy soil, humus slows drainage by holding moisture. Humus encourages earthworms and microorganisms which both add to the fertility of the soil.

Compost heaps or bins help to speed up the process of decomposition. They should be roughly 4' high X 4-5' in diameter to help hold the heat and moisture in place. There are four basic elements needed to make compost: carbon, nitrogen, oxygen and water.

1) Carbon: Can be added with dead leaves, straw, hay, shredded black & white paper, wood ashes or sawdust. Items should be shredded to speed up decomposition.

2) Nitrogen: Includes fresh grass clipping, green plant debris, cow, chicken or horse manure, egg shells, coffee grounds, tea leaves and uncooked fruits & vegetables.

Do Not Use: meat, grease, bones, cooked foods, dairy products or pet manure.

3) Oxygen: Microorganisms use the carbon for energy and nitrogen for growth. As the core heats up, it needs oxygen to continue to burn. This is accomplished by turning the pile. The more you turn, the faster the decomposition.

4) Water: The compost pile should have 50% moisture. When squeezed, it should form a ball but water shouldn't squeeze out.

Start with a layer of brush, which will allow some airflow. Add a 6" layer of leaves or vegetable matter, followed by a 2" layer of manure or other green manure. Next, add 1/8<sup>th</sup> layer of topsoil. Dampen layers and repeat. Compost can be turned every 2-3 weeks or every 3 days if you want to speed things up.

I use both compost heaps to hold my leaves over winter and a 18 bushel compost tumbler that makes dark, rich humus in 14 days.

Weather permitting, Master Gardener Volunteers will be hosting a compost demonstration at the West End Horticultural Demonstration Garden near the railroad tracks on Brenner Avenue on Friday, June 7<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 a.m. volunteers will be demonstrating how to make compost using a 3-bin container as well as a compost tumbler.

Pam Ervin is a Master Gardener Volunteer with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service in Salisbury.

