

COMMON COMPOSTING Qs & As

1. How do I get started with backyard composting? Stop by the Ecology Center for a fact sheet (from *Ecology Reports*, March 1988). Look through the composting section in one of the various organic gardening books in the Center's library. Visit Project Grow's Compost Education Site at the Leslie Science Center, 1831 Traver Road or sign up for Project Grow's composting workshops (996-3169). Or send a self-addressed stamped envelope to Compost Steps, Organic Gardening Magazine, 33 E. Minor St., Emmaus, PA 18098. Then, just take the plunge. Your yard debris will turn into humus on its own if given a chance, and you can always move a pile site or refine a technique in the future.

2. Any special tips for handling grass clippings? A light layer of grass clippings can be left to decompose on the lawn and will return nitrogen to the soil. Grass makes an excellent mulch around garden plants and shrubs and will help keep the soil moist and weed-free. Huge mounds of wet grass clippings alone can smell sour as they decompose, so it is best to layer grass with drier, brown, and bulky yard debris (such as leaves or flower prunings) and throw in a shovel-full of soil for every three inches of grass clippings. Keep a supply of leaves from fall to add to grass clippings during spring and summer. Turning a compost pile "inside-out" with a shovel or pitchfork will prevent odors and will also speed up decomposition.

3. Help! What about...

• **Kitchen scraps?** You may add all your leftover fruit and vegetable scraps, pasta, breads, dairy, etc. Just be sure to cover each layer of kitchen scraps with a layer of yard debris (grass, leaves, etc.) or a shovel-full of dirt.

• **Meat scraps?** *Do not add meat scraps, bones, or grease* to the compost because they are slow to decompose and may attract rodents.

• **Newspapers?** You may compost any newspaper that is not fit for recycling. A concern about the toxicity of residue inks seems unfounded. Some organic gardening

methods even advocate using newspapers as mulch. (On a more bizarre note, some dairy farmers use shredded newspaper as a cheap cattle feed extender. Tests on the milk and meat of these cows has not found any trace of ink residues.)

• **Ashes?** Fireplace ashes from wood and newspaper are fine to add to a compost pile. *Do not add ashes from barbecue charcoal.*

• **Weeds?** Theoretically, a "hot" compost pile will fully decompose the seeds on weed plants so they will not linger to re-enter the soil. As a safeguard you can pick weeds before they go to seed and avoid any possible complications.

• **Oak and walnut leaves?** Oak leaves are notoriously slow to decompose on their own. One hint to speed leaf decomposition is to shred them with your lawn mower, by mowing over the leaves, or using a shredder before adding them to the compost pile. Wal-

nut leaves contain a substance that inhibits the growth of other plants, which can linger unless thoroughly composted in a hot pile.

• **Pet feces?** Most animal feces can be added to a compost pile. Vegetarian animal droppings, such as from chickens or cattle, are considered particularly benign. Because cats can carry toxoplasmosis, a disease contagious to humans, it is probably wise not to compost kitty litter. An alternative recommendation is to purchase Ever Clean kitty litter, which can be scooped for urine and feces and safely flushed down the toilet into municipal wastewater systems. Although expensive at \$15 for around three gallons of kitty litter, this product lasts a very long time because it does not harbor odors. Another safeguard for dog and cat feces is to bury them in a trench in an area you do not plan to use for vegetables for a while. (Information on trench composting will appear in the September issue of *Ecology Reports*.)

Compiled by Nancy Stone with contributions from area composting consultant Susan Drew at Resource Recycling Systems. Δ

BACKYARD COMPOSTING WORKSHOPS OFFER HELP FROM A TO Z

Project Grow, a nonprofit community gardening organization, is offering three sets of three workshops on backyard composting this summer to help get people up and running with affordable, workable composting systems. Each series of three workshops costs \$15 and follows the same format:

- a) *An Overview of Home Composting: Why, How, What*
- b) *Building and Using Your Own Backyard Composting System*
- c) *Trouble-Shooting Your Composting Questions*

Series I will be held a) June 16, b) June 23, and c) July 21 (all Saturdays); Series II will be held a) July 11, b) July 18, and c) August 15 (all Wednesdays); Series III will be held a) August 11, b) August 18, and c) September 16 (two Saturdays and one Sunday during the annual Project Grow Fall Festival).

All of the workshops will be held at the Leslie Science Center, 1831 Traver Road, in Ann Arbor. Project Grow and the City of Ann Arbor maintain a composting demonstration area on site with displays of many different composting methods, including many different bins. For more information and to register, call 996-3169. A children's composting activity is also offered from Project Grow.

Are You Composting Already?

Project Grow and the Ann Arbor Solid Waste Department would like to collect photos and stories of local backyard composting systems. Your name and address will be kept private or shared as you wish. Please leave a message at the Project Grow office, 996-3169. Δ