

My Yard – October Got Leaves? Compost.

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, plantnebraska.org

Fall is right around the corner, as well as the falling leaves that go with it. The old saying says “if life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” An autumn adaptation might be “if life gives you leaves, make compost.” Composting has a long list of benefits and minimal effort and patience are greatly rewarded.

Composting takes advantage of a natural process, nature’s way of transforming plant “waste” into what gardeners often refer to as “black gold”. The finished product is the perfect soil amendment for gardens, planting beds and even lawns. It adds valuable nutrients released safely over an extended time. Compost also does a wonderful job of improving the structure and increasing water holding capacity, drainage and aeration of the soil, plus it serves as a buffer to soil pH. Another benefit is the addition of beneficial organisms that have been shown to improve a plant’s ability to deal with insect and disease attacks. Compost simply makes the soil much more productive.

The environmental benefits list is also long. If you don’t compost it’s likely you bag all the yard waste and pay to have it hauled away, then drive to the garden center to buy soil amendments and fertilizers. By composting you reduce or eliminate the substantial energy, pollution and packaging waste involved with those steps. Compost also serves as a carbon sink, keeping carbon in the soil where it is an asset, rather than in the atmosphere where it is a liability.

Composting works whether you are ambitious or...not. Putting in the extra work of precise mixing and frequent turning speeds up the process, but if you’d rather not, patience is rewarded with the same final product. Either way, compost happens.

Any plant material can be used to make compost. Ideally you will have a 1:1 ratio of high carbon “browns” (dry leaves, wood chips, straw) and high nitrogen “greens” (kitchen and garden scraps, grass clippings, coffee grounds), all slightly damp. Warm weather speeds up the process while cold weather slows or stops it.

Short or long on materials? That’s a perfect time to get to know your neighbor or even your local coffee shop. Also, if you have room, it’s great to store leaves to use to mix with your kitchen scraps all year round.

As soon as you start your mix a whole range of critters go to work for you, including bacteria, fungi, millipedes, pillbugs and earthworms. The army of workers you get depends on the components and conditions of your mix. High volume, fresh mixes with plenty of nitrogen and appropriate moisture will get hot from bacterial activity. Smaller, older and high carbon mixes will be cooler with larger creatures, like pillbugs, doing most of the work.

Done properly, compost does not create unpleasant aromas. A sopping wet pile of grass clippings will stink (anaerobic bacteria), while a damp, not wet, balanced mix of “browns” and “greens” will not.

You can speed up the process by frequently aerating (mixing) your compost pile and adding water if dry. Taking these steps will get you finished compost in as few as two months. If you’d rather not go to the trouble—don’t. Be patient and you will have compost in a season or two, again, depending on the components and condition of your mix. Chopped, damp maple leaves decompose rapidly while whole, dry oak leaves seem to last a lifetime.

Your compost is complete when it’s broken down to mostly tiny, dark pieces with an earthy aroma. Put it to use by incorporating into your garden soil or planting beds or using as a potting mix. It can also be beneficial when used as a light topdressing on turfgrass. So consider avoiding the hassle and expense of bagging and trashing all those leaves this fall and instead look at them as the valuable resource they are.



Kendall Weyers