

## ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM/ LIMESTONE COUNTY OFFICE

**The Garden Spot**  
**For week of September 21, 2009**

### **Backyard Composting**

Composting has become a way of not only using yard and some kitchen waste, but an economical option for adding nutrients to a home yard or garden.

Composting is the biological decomposition of organic material into a humus-like substance called compost. The process occurs naturally, but can be accelerated and improved by controlling environmental factors. The question often arises: “Why bother with composting if everything organic decomposes eventually anyway?”

If raw wastes are put directly into the soil, the decomposition process will rob the soil of nitrogen, an important nutrient for plants. Finished compost from a pile is typically a more uniform product with a better balance of nutrients. It can be used throughout the growing season in many different ways.



With a pile, composters have more control over adding and mixing the amount of carbon and nitrogen rich materials used to make the end product. In addition, a properly controlled composting environment can ensure production of high temperatures needed for killing weed seeds, diseased plant tissue, and pathogenic organisms.

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#### **Composting Benefits**

Composting materials has many benefits. Nutrients that otherwise are removed when trimmings are bagged can be placed back into the nutrient cycle, lessening the need for fertilizers. When added to the soil, the nutrients present in compost are released slowly, so they are less likely to leach out of the root zone, as compared to regular fertilizer. Soil structure is

improved by the addition of organic matter. Organic matter, such as that present in compost, aids in creating a structure that allows good water retention and root penetration. As yard materials go through the composting process, there is an increase in temperature within the compost pile. High temperatures kill most disease pathogens present. Most weed seeds and pesticides are destroyed as well because of the high temperature.

Materials that may be acidic when added to a compost pile will become almost neutral in pH when the composting process is complete. Soils that are high or low in pH may make some nutrients less available for plant use, or may let plants take in too much. When added to soil that is acidic or alkaline, compost acts as a buffer against high or low pH.

### **What To Compost**

The materials you put into your compost pile have a major impact on how well the composting process works and the quality of the final compost. The key to good composting is to have a variety of materials. Variety increases the types of microorganisms at work in your pile and your chances of obtaining a nutrient-rich compost.

One must be careful in what they add to their compost heap. While anything organic will eventually decompose, it may not belong in a backyard composting pile. It is important to be aware of these materials and the reasons they should be avoided. New and potential composters often have questions about what materials can be composted.

The following are lists of “What To” and “What TO NOT” include in compost piles. These lists are just examples.

### **What to Compost**

- Animal manure
- Cardboard rolls
- Clean paper
- Coffee grounds and filters
- Cotton rags
- Dryer and vacuum cleaner lint
- Eggshells
- Fireplace ashes
- Fruits and vegetables
- Grass clippings
- Hair and fur
- Hay and straw

- Houseplants
- Leaves
- Nut shells
- Sawdust
- Shredded newspaper
- Tea bags
- Wood chips
- Wool rags
- Yard trimmings

#### **What Not to Compost –**

- Black walnut tree leaves or twigs
- Coal or charcoal ash
- Dairy products (e.g., butter, egg yolks, milk, sour cream, yogurt)
- Diseased or insect-ridden plants
- Fats, grease, lard, or oils
- Meat or fish bones and scraps
- Pet wastes (e.g., dog or cat feces, soiled cat litter)
- Yard trimmings treated with chemical pesticides

**NOTE:** Compost should not be used as potting soil for houseplants because of the presence of weed and grass seeds.

For more information on composting, stop by the Limestone County Extension office at 1109 W. Market Street in Athens and request publication “Backyard Composting – # **ANR-638**”; or go to the website: [www.aces.edu/publications](http://www.aces.edu/publications) .

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