

# The Essentialist

April 8, 2009

Bigfork's Essential Stuff Newsletter -- Bringing People Together  
A Publication of the Essential Stuff Project, Bigfork, Montana

---

## Composting: Kitchen & Yard Scraps

by Sally Janover

When you compost, what goes around truly does come around.

There are many ways to compost. You can find a wide variety of suggested methods for composting on line, in books, at gardening events and at nurseries. If you're just starting out, it could be confusing, sound complicated or seem too time consuming.

I've been composting for many years, in many states, on large and on very small properties. I'm a busy person, but one with an environmental conscience, so there's no way I could *not* recycle my food scraps, fall leaves and other "mulchables" from my kitchen and my yard.

### My Inspiration

When I first started composting, I tried a Rodale method, "Make Compost in 14 Days." I've been able to adapt that method to where ever I am, and it's always served me well.

I don't use a bin, though I have one – empty. I find a bin too restrictive, and I'm not that concerned about monitoring the perfect temperature. I get lovely, friable soil to use in my gardens in a short period of time using my method. Maybe mine will end up containing a few volunteers from earlier gardens – especially cherry-tomatoes and cucurbits – but those are just gifts as far as I'm concerned.

Because I don't monitor the temperature of the pile, I don't put anything in my compost pile that could contaminate it, or be invasive. I don't include:

- feces, other than from grass eating animals,
- grass clippings, weeds, or plants that have been diseased or been treated with herbicides or pesticides.

Instead, I leave grass cuttings to compost naturally on the lawn or in their own pile where they won't be used for my gardens. I rake fall leaves around the trunks of my trees in a circle at their drip line where they serve as mulch, breaking down gradually over winter.

## **My Method**

### **Step One: Gather materials and Begin Composting**

You'll need:

- 2 medium or large sized garbage cans (depending on how much room you have),
- sawdust (from a local lumber yard)
- large scoop,
- large garbage bag
- large bag of composted manure,
- large bag of lime.
- pitchfork,
- rake,
- digging shovel,
- garden hose long enough for watering,
- at least three substantial sticks (old broom handles are good.), and
- a wheelbarrow will be very helpful.

One of your cans is filled with the sawdust. Line the other can with a large garbage bag, then add about two inches of sawdust into the bottom. Put the two cans in a convenient place outside, as near to the kitchen door as possible, with the bags of manure and lime close at hand too. Make sure they are all protected from snow and rain so that you can get to them easily.

It's a good idea to keep a small covered pail by the kitchen sink, where you put the food and plant scraps of the day, except for meat. You can use a crock, or jar, so long as it's covered. It's important to crush eggshells, and cut up large pieces of anything going into the compost in order to speed up the composting process. When the pail is full, dump it into the lined can and cover it with two or more big scoops of sawdust from the other can so that the scraps are covered by sawdust.

When the big can with scraps and sawdust is full – or not too heavy for me to be picked up and moved – you're ready for step two.

### **Step Two: Make Compost "Lasagna"**

Dig a hole in your yard deep & wide enough to easily accommodate the contents of your scraps-can. Pile the dirt from the hole nearby to use as you make compost "lasagna."

1. At the bottom of the hole add a layer of manure, and a thin layer of lime.
2. Empty a third of the scraps-can into the hole.
3. Repeat the layers again – manure and lime - only this time adding a generous amount of the dirt you dug up.
4. After you've completely emptied your scraps-can, put one last layer of manure and lime, and top it off with the rest of the soil you dug up plus any dry leaves and small twigs nearby.

## Composting: Kitchen & Yard Scraps

5. Then water until the pile is pretty well saturated, poking the pile a number of times with the sticks to allow oxygen in, and then leave the sticks in the pile at various places so the pile can breathe.

### **Step Three: Maintain your Pile to Make New Soil**

Wait a few days, depending upon the amount of ambient moisture, before going out to the compost pile. You don't want it to dry out, but you don't want it to get too wet either. When it's time:

1. Turn the pile (using the pitchfork), mixing up the layers well.
2. When done mixing, cover the pile again with soil, and water enough to dampen the whole pile.
3. Aerate again with the sticks, and leave them in the pile again.
4. If you have the right mix of ingredients, the pile should be generating enough heat for you to feel it just holding your hand over it. But even without that, you will end up with soil you can use.
5. Repeat this process periodically, as needed, until you see that the scraps have broken down into soil. There will be plenty of worms included.
6. You can use the new soil elsewhere at that point, or cover it with dirt to save for later.
7. Meantime, you've probably started another batch in your cans. Be thinking of the next hole you want to dig, or redistribute the contents of your first pile so you can fill it again with a new batch.

### **When to Compost**

You can start a compost pile anytime, but the best time is in the late fall. I put mine under a large cedar because rain and snow are filtered there and don't oversaturate the pile, and where the changing temperatures are less extreme. Even if you can't get out to turn the pile during cold months, the moisture from repeated snows and rains over winter will work for you, so long as the pile has a thick "comfort" of dirt and leaves over it and has been well aerated. Come spring, rich soil will be waiting for you.

I don't use all the soil I've produced in the many holes I've dug. It's more than I need for my annual vegetable gardens. But, the soil on my whole property is vastly improved over time just by having compost holes everywhere.

When you compost, what goes around truly does come around.