

Composting method described

NEWARK, Del. - This is the time of year when enthusiastic gardeners like to trade secrets on how to raise two-pound tomatoes or keep insects away from their peppers and eggplants by various practices. One idea that many would welcome is for an easy way to prepare compost. University of Delaware Extension vegetable specialist Dr. Michael Orzolek has just such a recipe.

Compost is one of those natural materials no organic gardener would be without. But an application of well-rotted compost will benefit any garden, no matter what your philosophy about growing plants.

Compost can be prepared from many different materials, including tree leaves, lawn clippings, coffee grounds, straw, sawdust, dead houseplants, dried flowers and other organic material. It can be applied to soils in the same manner as manure. In areas where lawns are to be seeded, broadcast 500

pounds of compost per 1000 square feet of ground and mix this into the top four to six inches of soil, to prepare a good seedbed. Use it in your vegetable garden as an enriching soil conditioner. Besides improving tilth, it will increase the soil's water-holding capacity.

To prepare compost for the home garden, Orzolek says it's desirable to use a bin that's four feet high and four feet wide, and long enough to hold the material to be composted. (If you have the room, it's even better to have two bins, side by side, so that compost ready for use can be kept in one container, while new compost is started in the other.) Chicken wire or other fencing nailed to posts will give you satisfactory bin. It doesn't need a floor.

The top of your compost pile should be kept flat so that it will catch rain water. Apply five pounds of a complete fertilizer such as 10-5-5 to each 100 pounds of organic matter that you put in the bin.

During the initial preparation of the pile, it will be necessary to add water if you use dry plant residues. The best moisture content for the composting process is between 50 to 70 per cent. In dry weather you'll have to water the pile liberally to facilitate the breakdown of organic matter.

A layer of soil about an inch deep spread over the top of the pile will help prevent the loss of nitrogen.

After you've prepared your compost heap, let it stand for about three weeks. Then turn and mix material thoroughly with a spading fork. Repeat this turning process at intervals of about two or three weeks. The compost will crumble easily in your hand when decomposition is complete. This will take about three to four months.

You can start your compost heap at any time of year, says the vegetable specialist. Just remember that piles started in the Fall when temperatures are low will require a longer period of time for decomposition.

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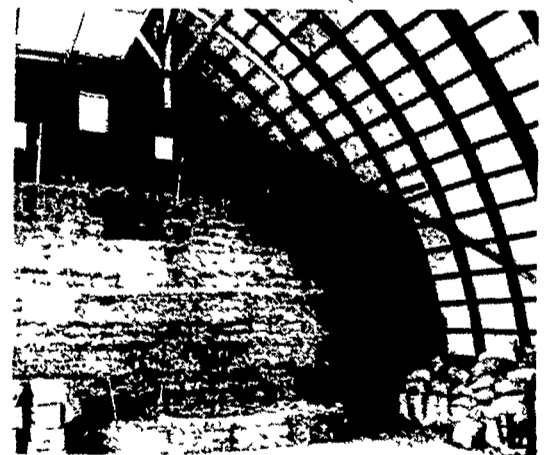


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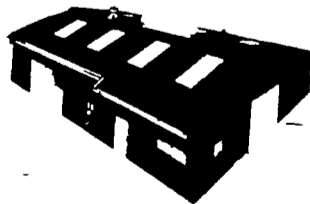
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