

Fall Is Ideal Time To Build Compost Pile

HUNTINGDON (Huntingdon Co.) — When the dog days of summer yield to the cooler days of autumn, homeowners may want to build a compost pile to recycle leaves, garden plants, kitchen scraps and grass clippings. And the composting process can continue through the coldest days of winter, says an expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"Nearly 30 percent of the waste homeowners throw away each year can be composted," says Dr. J. Robert Nuss, professor of ornamental horticulture. "Composting turns wastes into a valuable soil conditioner to use in gardens, around trees and on lawns."

Composting is an inexpensive, natural process that decomposes organic matter into a dark, crumbly material similar to humus. Finished compost helps soil retain water by increasing its organic content. It also provides some nutrients.

To build a compost pile, start by deciding which type of compost bin to use. "Composting doesn't require a structure or bin, but uncontained heaps can be visually offensive to neighbors," Nuss says.

Ready-made compost bins are available at hardware or lawn and garden stores or from gardening catalogs. An inexpensive bin can be made from masonry blocks, boards, wire or snow fence. The bin should be at least three feet high and three feet wide.

Place the bin on level ground and fill it with organic household or yard waste, such as plant matter, vegetable scraps, egg shells, coffee grounds, sawdust — even small amounts of newspaper.

The pile should contain a mix of carbon-rich and nitrogen-rich materials because both are essential for the microorganisms that do the decomposing. "Green, leafy wastes generally are high in nitrogen, while woody materials tend

to be high in carbon," Nuss says. "Fertilizer and manure also are good sources of nitrogen."

The composting microorganisms require water, so the pile should be kept moist. One way to gauge moisture is the squeeze test. "Tightly squeeze a handful of material from the pile," Nuss says. "If more than one or two drops of water come out, the pile is too moist. If the pile feels drier than a wrung-out sponge, it's too dry."

Decomposition without oxygen can cause bad odors, so turn the pile weekly with a pitchfork to aerate it. Using a fair amount of course material — dry leaves or

bulky plants, for instance — also helps ensure that the pile gets proper aeration.

With proper aeration and ample amounts of carbon, nitrogen and moisture, the pile should reach at least 90 degrees Fahrenheit in the middle. Temperatures up to 140 F will kill weed seeds in the compost, but higher temperatures can kill the composting microbes. A soil thermometer can be used to check the soil temperature. If the temperature gets too high, turn the compost pile. "As long as the pile is large enough to insulate itself, it will continue to decompose throughout the winter without being turned," Nuss says.

"When warm weather returns in the spring, begin turning it again." The compost is ready to use when the pile cools and the material is dark, crumbly and sweet-smelling, like soil.

Complete information about starting a home compost pile is available in "Composting to Reduce the Waste Stream: A Guide to Small Scale Food and Yard Waste Composting," a 48-page publication featuring easy-to-read charts and guidelines. Copies of the guide are available for \$4.00 from the Publications. Call your local Penn State Extension office for a copy or more information.

Cultivate A Tradition — Plant A Family Tree

NEWARK, Del. — For \$50 you and your family could spend next weekend at a show or splurging on dinner at a favorite restaurant. Or, for about the same expense, you could devote your time to planting a tree.

"Tree planting is the perfect family activity," says University of Delaware Cooperative Extension horticulture specialist Susan Barton. "And, unlike the transitory pleasures of a night at the theater or dining out, you and your family will continue to enjoy the tree you've planted for many years to come."

Often, families imbue tree planting with symbolic meaning, notes Barton. They may plant a tree to mark the birth of a new baby, a child's first day in kindergarten or the death of a loved one.

As a tree grows, kids may find that it's the perfect place to build a fort or twirl on a tire swing. Adults may find that the shady spots beneath its branches are just right

for planting impatiens or parking a chaise lounge.

Kids and adults together can collect and press the tree's leaves and search the branches for berries and flowers, says Barton. By studying a tree in all its seasons, children learn about the cycles of nature — of growth, maturation, dormancy, death and new life.

Have we convinced you to get your family together and go plant a tree?

Good. Then your first order of business is to check the selection of trees at your local garden shop. Barton advises against planting from seed because the cultivars available at retail outlets tend to be hardier and provide improved horticultural attributes, such as brighter fall colors.

"When you are ready to dig your tree's hole, remember that deeper isn't better," says Barton. "On the contrary, since 80 percent of the roots grow in the top 8 inches of soil, a flat, pancake-

shaped hole is ideal."

An adult should dig the hole, but children can get involved in the backfill process. For example, when Barton planted a tree with her daughter's kindergarten class, she had the children use sand shovels to smooth out the backfilled hole.

After filling the hole, everyone can help add a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch, being careful not to get mulch on the trunk itself. Finally, give the children responsibility for seeing that the tree gets 1 inch of water per week — if not from the clouds then from a garden hose. Tell the children to set the hose at a small trickle and allow it to run for a half hour to an hour.

Cooperative Extension offers "Trees," a booklet that covers the selection, planting and care. The cost is \$2.50. Pick up a copy at your county Extension office.



Pre-Teen To Teens Workshop For Parents

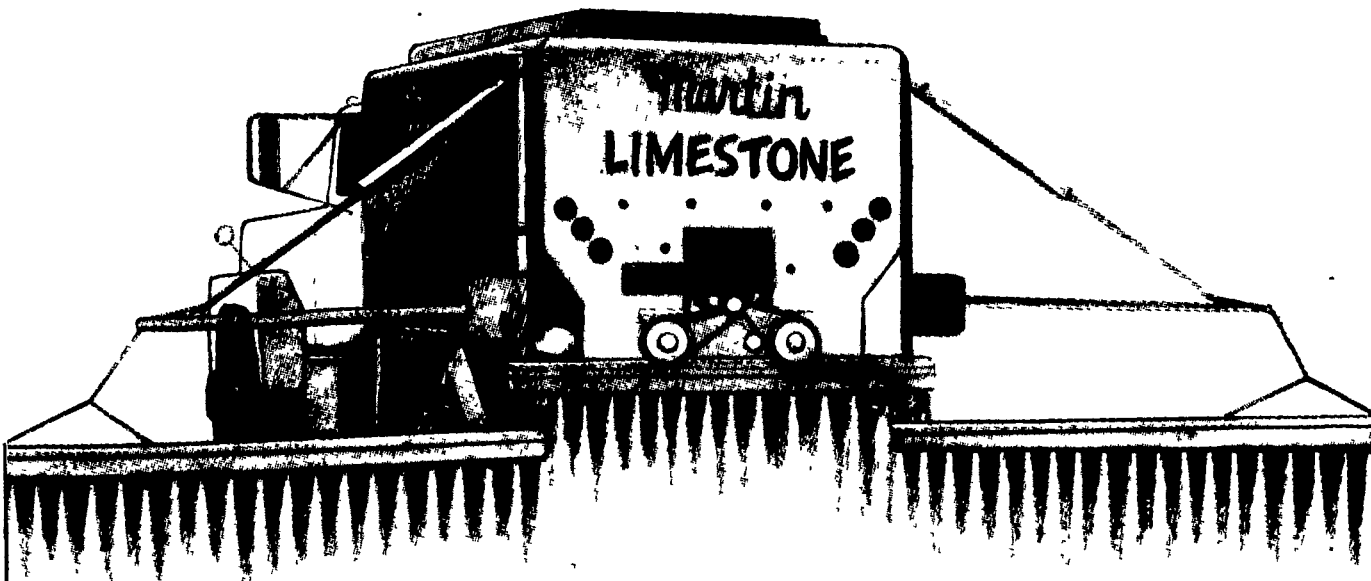
YORK (York Co.) — The Spring Grove School District and Celebrate Your Family Committee are co-sponsoring a workshop on November 6, 1993 on parenting pre-teens. Keeping the Celebration "Alive-Pre-Teens to Teens" is scheduled from 8:15 a.m.-1:00 p.m. November 6, at Spring Grove Middle School.

Topics include Raising Responsible Pre-Early Teens, Building Your Child's Self-Esteem, Rais-

ing Sexually Healthy Children, Substance Abuse and Youth-What's a Parent To Do?

In addition, a panel of Spring Grove Middle School students will share their feelings and experiences as pre-teen and early teens.

For registration information call Family Child Resources at (717) 757-1227 or Penn State Cooperative Extension at (717) 757-9657.



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