

# Compost happens

BY DELLA MERRILL

Did you know it takes thousands of years for the earth to create an inch of rich topsoil? And every time we pull a carrot out of the ground or harvest a tomato or pick a weed, we are taking with them precious dirt. You can only do that so often until your soil becomes depleted. Composting is a perfect solution for replenishing the dirt because it not only addresses the soil's need for more nutrients, it keeps otherwise discarded materials out of the landfills and it reduces our reliance on fossil fuel fertilizers.

Compost happens, but not without some attention to details. It takes just the right amount of carbon and nitrogen, consistent amounts of oxygen and water, and you have the recipe for a really HOT party. So hot it would hard-boil an egg!

Now most people have heard of composting and many even practice cold composting. Simply put, cold composting is piling all your yard clippings in a pile and forgetting about it. Sure it takes less effort than hot composting, but it also takes much longer for the material to decompose; say one to three years longer.

Hot composting, on the other hand, is truly an art form much like very good cooking. In fact being a conscientious composter takes some of the same skills as being a master chef; ability to follow a recipe, the courage to change it up when necessary and the wisdom to know when to do what. You'll also need to recall some of those math and science basics you learned some time ago, but believe me the effort is worth it! A hot compost pile, properly created, will decompose the materials much faster, as in two to six months (as opposed to years the cold way), and heat up to temperatures of 145

degrees and beyond.

In the case of hot composting, size really does matter. You'll want to create a pile that is at least 3'x3'x3'. And bigger here, is often better. As far as compost bins go, it's my opinion that a free form pile not only does the job just right, but it's free. No need to purchase "compost bins" sold at local nurseries unless you're really cramped for room.

Believe me, there is nothing like visiting your compost pile for the first time and inserting the thermometer and watching the needle as it approaches the 150-degree mark. It's quite magical. And just think, what's creating that heat is millions of microorganisms having a party; munching, digesting, and expelling all the stuff in your pile.

You might wonder what supplies or equipment is needed. Actually it's quite simple. In addition to the materials you'll use for composting, such as old hay, weeds, manure, and vegetable scraps, you'll need

a wheelbarrow, pitchfork, water, and compost thermometer.

Now don't forget, not all compost piles are created equally and some need a little more attention to detail, especially if things start to stink. If you've created the correct mix of carbon to nitrogen, it shouldn't stink. But here again, pay attention, your nose will know the truth if your pile needs tending. The odor is impossible to ignore. Usually it's a case of too much water or too much nitrogen that causes the really bad smells. But other issues can also slow down the decomposition process such as lack of water or a pile that's too small.

So if you have yard clippings, weeds, leaves, and garden waste you have what it takes to heat up your compost piles. If you have farm animals, horses, goats, chickens,



you are in an even better position to make great compost. And there's no reason to wait. You can take Sanctuary One's composting class, Compost Happens, and learn the dos and don'ts, and go for it. With a little education, practice and attention to the details, you'll be cooking up your own hardboiled eggs on no time, not to mention enriching your soil!

If hot composting doesn't inspire you, then you might consider some of the other techniques for turning materials into usable soil enriching compost; vermiculture (worm composting), hugelkultur (uses wood scraps for composting), and making compost tea. Whatever method you try, just go for it and have fun.

As a care farm, Sanctuary One cares deeply about the earth. One of the essentials to caring for the earth is creating healthy soil using materials that would otherwise be turned into waste. So we compost and want to teach others how to do so as well. We offer composting classes Thursday and Saturdays, from April through October. For more information, please visit us on the Web at [www.SanctuaryOne.org](http://www.SanctuaryOne.org), or give us a call at 541-899-8627.

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Photo far left: A hot compost pile.

Near left: Rich soil made from compost.

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