Composting the Minimalist Way!
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There is no single, right way to compost or wrong time to start. One needs only to designate a place to pile unwanted “greens” and “browns” (more about that later) and then let nature run its course, decomposing the organic matter to free nutrients that fertilize the soil.

I have been composting for four decades, now, but the way that I do it has evolved--eliminating precise measurements, costly additives and labor along the way. Now, I am a minimalist who works with nature to accomplish my gardening goals. Good compost, applied once a year, enriches the soil and, so, is an important part of that approach.

We live in a townhouse so our compost bins are small and compact--a couple of heavy, perforated, plastic sheets that wrap into cylinders secured with plastic bolts, tucked into a corner by the chimney, out of sight. (You can buy them cheaply from the County, http://frederickcountymd.gov/, Composting.) We use one as a holding bin and the other as an active composter.

This spring, my husband simply lifted the compost bin out of the way, shoveled the cascading pile of “black gold” into the yard cart and dumped it strategically around our yard. Then he spread it evenly throughout the raised annual vegetable beds, raked it around the sprouting plants--staying several inches from the woody stems of shrubs and trees but extending it to their drip lines--and sprinkled it on our grass.

Since there was insufficient compost to provide every plant with a half-inch or so, we will purchase more in bulk from Frederick County or in bags of Montgomery County’s Leafgro, both of which are high quality products though they may contain residual chemicals from people’s yards so we use our own, organic mix in the vegetable beds.

We do not till the compost into the soil because the latest scientific research shows that it does more harm than good, disrupting the active web of life that carries organics down and pushes rocks (minerals) up to the zone where the symbiotic plant roots feed in the top 4-6” of soil, for herbaceous (green-stemmed) plants, and 8-10” for shrubs and trees. So, following nature’s lead, we layer compost on top of the soil and then, in turn, top it with water-retaining, botanical mulch.

After clearing out this year’s harvest of compost, we replaced the active bin and transferred into it, from the holding bin, a thick layer of last year’s semi-composted tree leaves. Then, we started adding the new “greens”--herbaceous (green) stems, leaves and trimmings, from which we carefully removed the roots of perennial weeds, seed stalks and plants. The latter were consigned to a huge paper bag for garden waste, (available in grocery stores) that the County picks up and hot-composts professionally.

The key is to feed the bin, over the course of the summer, with layers of greens and browns, the brown layers being about twice the volume of the green. If we have insufficient tree leaves, we use other “browns” such as clean paper, ripped cardboard and untreated wood chips.

That is the only maintenance that we do. We neither turn the compost nor ensure that the bin stays moist in hot weather. After all, nature doesn’t. It takes longer to produce compost that way but I have learned patience.
For me, the process of creating compost is eminently satisfying, not only because it provides the best possible, pure, organic fertilizer for my garden but also because it is a method of recycling what would otherwise be destined for expensive landfills. Just think what would happen if everyone did it!

*For more information about the science and practice of composting, download “Backyard Composting” from the online publications at www.hgic.umd.edu.*

*For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit www.frederick.umd.edu/mg or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at [http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland](http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland)*

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