

Compost offers the most!

As this winter season has finally come to a close, you may be starting to plan your spring gardens. When choosing which flowers and vegetables to plant, you can also choose to use materials that can improve water quality. In honor of International Compost Awareness Week, May 5-11, let's take a few minutes to talk about compost: what it is, how it improves our environment, and how it can benefit your garden!



Photo 1. Fruit and vegetable waste is a valuable source of nitrogen for your compost.

What is compost?

Composting is nature's way of recycling organic materials into nutrients for healthy soil and plant growth. Food scraps and yard waste, such as grass clippings and leaf litter, on average, make up 20 to 30 percent of what households throw away. Many of these materials can be recycled through composting and the resulting product can be used to improve soil and water quality, all while helping your plants grow. Collecting and composting yard waste and kitchen scraps is one of the easiest ways you can help reduce what goes to your local landfill and what becomes run-off pollutants in our streams and other waterways. Compost, whether homemade or store-bought, mulches and suppresses weeds and pests in your garden to help grow trouble-free plants that require less water, fertilizer or pesticides. In addition, diverting organic materials from landfills reduces air pollutants that are emitted from the breakdown of landfill waste.

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| <i>What is in compost?</i> | Browns include dead leaves, branches, and twigs. Brown materials provide carbon for your compost. |
| | Greens include grass clippings, vegetable waste, fruit scraps, and coffee grounds. Green materials provide nitrogen for your compost. |
| | Water provides the moisture necessary to help bacteria break down the organic matter for your compost. |



Composting and water pollution prevention



Photo 2. Layered brown and green materials in a wire compost bin.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, more than 20,000 rivers, lakes, and estuaries are harmed by sediment run-off, excess nutrients (e.g., nitrogen and phosphorus found in fertilizers), and harmful microorganisms. Organic wastes, such as grass clippings and leaf litter, are major sources of run-off pollution in our streams and waterways. Composting takes these raw materials and stabilizes the nutrients within them. The nutrients are then slowly released over time, increasing the opportunity for up-take by your plants and reducing the amount of nutrient pollution further downstream. Compost, when used as a soil enhancement can improve soil structure, reduce compaction, and increase water infiltration. This decreases the amount of soil erosion and sediment in our waterways.

Here are the environmental and economic benefits of composting to consider when planting your garden this year.

| Environmental Benefits | Economic Benefits |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased soil fertility • Improved soil structure: resistance to erosion and soil run-off • Increased water holding capacity (water conservation) • Improved disease resistance in plants (less pesticide use) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces the need for herbicides • Reduces the need for chemical fertilizers • Supports markets for local compost producers • Avoids landfill disposal costs for yard waste • Conserving water: less watering needed |

Visit the websites below for more information on composting.

<http://www2.epa.gov/recycle/composting-home>

<http://compostingcouncil.org/admin/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Using-Compost-for-Reducing-Water-Pollution.pdf>

http://www.mawaterquality.org/publications/documents/MAWQPCompostingResourceDirectory_revSep2010.pdf

