



Trowel Talk!

July, 2012

Breaking down composting

Compost is a natural slow release fertilizer that can be used as a top dressing, as mulch for water retention and weed control, or to enrich planting beds. Compost is easy to make and adding it to your garden soil will help produce healthier plants.

Vegetative compost is a dark, crumbly mixture of broken down organic matter. It can be composed of grass clippings, leaves, straw, twigs, branches, annual weeds (without seeds), coffee or tea leftovers, other scrap vegetation from kitchen and yard, and old soil from potted plants.

To begin, choose somewhere to locate a few piles of vegetative material. Like most people I prefer to put my composters in an area that is not obvious to neighbours or visitors. A partially sunny location will help bring the temperature to a level that will stimulate microbes to multiply and break down organic matter. If you locate your compost pile in an airless, shady area, composting may take longer.

To compost efficiently you need three things: air, water and the right ratio of carbon (brown material such as dead leaves) and nitrogen (fresh green material such as grass clippings or kitchen wastes). Layer the two types of material to arrive at – more or less

– a 30:1 ratio of carbon to nitrogen.

Keep things moist but not wet, and allow air to circulate through the decomposing mass. Thorough preparation and on-going maintenance make this task easy. You should not have to turn the compost, but doing this will increase the speed of decomposition.



Photo by Mary Ann Van Berlo

A four foot tall cylinder made of wire mesh holds a large amount of leaves which can be added to compost or allowed to break down into leaf mold, a great addition to the woodland garden

Break up your composting material as much as possible. Shredding, crushing or chopping will allow more surface area to be exposed to the elements thereby increasing the speed of decomposition. You must allow for heat to build up within your composting material – temperatures of 30-35 degrees C will speed up decomposition.

Anything that was once alive will break down into compost. So, in addition to the plant materials, you may also add vacuum cleaner contents, laundry fluff, non-contaminated sawdust, or wood chips. You should not add diseased, insect infested or toxic plant mate-

rial, weed seeds or perennial grasses. Do not include animal feces, animal or dairy products, grease, oil, treated wood products, plastic or metal.

Most people who have problems generating compost either do not allow sufficient air to move between particles of decomposing material, or have assembled a poor mix of materials and/or have allowed materials to become compacted. If your compost is not heating up, the pile may be too small or you may need to add moisture. If it smells sweetish you may need to add nitrogen in the form of kitchen scraps. Or you may need air to avoid compaction. Building some kind of shelf beneath your composter or drilling some holes will let in air. If your compost is soggy, try adding dry material and if the top layer does not decompose, try turning the material.



Photo by Mary Ann Van Berlo

The compost area at Larkwhistle Garden in Tobermory

Amending the soil in your garden with compost will improve its structure by increasing its porosity and moisture holding capacity. The home gardener can make all the compost that is needed for this purpose, and in so doing, grow healthier plants, promote a natural environment and reduce landfill problems.

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Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton

Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

ONGOING:

Telephone Help Line: 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1-3 pm (all year)
- Wednesday 7-8 pm (April - September)

E-mail Help Line: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca

- monitored daily
- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

CLINICS:

Carp Garlic Festival: August 11 (8 a.m. - 3 p.m.) and August 12 (10 a.m. - 3 p.m.), Carp Fair Grounds

Ottawa Farmers' Market (Brewer Park - formerly located at Lansdowne Park):
Sundays, July through September (9 a.m. - 1 p.m.)

SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

Continuous Colour in the Garden - September 5, 2012 - 7:00 p.m.

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Martintown Community Centre, County Road 20, Martintown, Ontario

Hosted by the Martintown Horticultural Society (guests welcome)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: speakers@mgottawa.mgoi.ca

For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.mgoi.ca>

July TO DO List

- Try to water all trees (including the city trees) and shrubs in periods of extreme drought. Recently planted trees and shrubs especially need watering since their root systems are not well established. A soaker hose or a hose with a slow trickle of water running over a long period of time will ensure the water gets all the way down to the roots since the water is delivered at a slow enough pace that it is sinks in instead of running off.
- Start to identify plants that you want to move or harvest seed from. Mark the plant with a stake or plastic ribbon so you can find it again later on. Make a TO DO list with notations in your calendar for September that will remind you of the plant you want to move and where you want to move it to.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

Tip of the Month:

June and early July have been very dry months indeed. Lawns and plants are looking and feeling more than a little crispy.

Some plants have evolved or adapted to drought. Here are a few of their characteristics.

Plants with grey or silver foliage are generally drought tolerant. Their colouring is usually caused by layers of white hairs on the leaf surface. These hairs reduce water loss by reflecting the sun's rays and holding moisture.

Plants with aromatic foliage (such as herbs) are also drought tolerant. The essential oils exuded from these plants act like a suntan lotion, which protects them from the sun's rays.

Some plants have bulbous roots (such as daylilies) that can store water.

Wilting or drooping during the hottest part of the day doesn't necessarily mean a plant is stressed - in some cases it is their natural defense against moisture loss. They do this by rolling their leaves up, closing down the stomata (small openings on the underside of the leaves that regulate the plant's respiration process).

And other plants deal with drought stress by going dormant. Our lawns are the perfect example of this. They shut down and rest to conserve what energy is left in their roots so that when the weather cools and moisture returns, they can re-sprout.

Some basic methods to deal with drought in our gardens include:

- planting native plants which are more adapted to our soils and climate
- plant drought tolerant plants
- use a mulch to keep moisture in the soil
- water in the evening when plants have a chance to absorb the water

before it starts to evaporate (avoid getting the leaves wet)



Top: Phlox in full sun

Lower: Phlox after a few hours of shade

For more information on conserving water and dealing with drought go to our [Fact Sheet](#) on Waterwise Gardening. You will also find a list of some drought tolerant plants there.