

EASY GARDENING...COMPOSTING

B. Dean McCraw*

As a home gardener you are probably interested in making your vegetables as comfortable as possible, and vegetables are most comfortable in a soil with lots of organic matter. Every home garden soil benefits from the addition of organic matter each year. This replaces some of the nutrients removed by growing vegetables, but more importantly, it improves the soil's physical characteristics, making it more workable. Organic matter also improves the soil's water and nutrient-holding capacity.

People have home gardens to save money, and compost is the least expensive soil additive available. It can be prepared from materials usually available in your own backyard.

Compost is simply plant material that has gone through a natural decomposition process. If prepared properly, compost reaches 160° F. or more. This destroys most weed seeds, insect eggs and disease organisms and results in a relatively pest-free product to mix with the garden soil (figure 1). Finished compost is soft and pliable and smells like freshly plowed soil.



Fig. 1

Materials

Use any plant material to make compost. Some examples of compost materials and treatment methods follow:

- *Grass clippings.* Mix green, fresh clippings with soil or dry plant material such as leaves. A thick layer of fresh clippings usually compacts when it settles. This prevents air from entering the pile and slows or prevents the composting process. Grass clippings are relatively high in nitrogen and make good compost.
- *Dry leaves.* These are plentiful in the fall and often can be found in bags by the curb waiting for the garbage collector. Most leaves compost faster and more thoroughly if shredded before adding to the pile. If you do not have a shredder, place the leaves in a row on your yard and cut them up with a rotary lawn mower. Rake the chopped leaves and add them to the compost pile.
- *Sawdust.* Always compost sawdust before adding to a garden soil. It is low in nitrogen and thus breaks down slowly. Add extra nitrogen to speed breakdown. Sawdust is plentiful at sawmills in many areas especially in East Texas.
- *Kitchen scraps.* Fruit and vegetable trimmings and leftovers are good items for the compost pile. Do not use animal products such as grease, fat and meat trimmings since they break down very slowly, attract rodents and other pests and have an unpleasant odor.
- *GIN trash.* This makes good compost but be sure the farmer did not use arsenicals on the cotton. Arsenic can carry over and cause vegetables to grow poorly. Your county Extension agent can tell you if arsenicals are used in your area.

*Extension horticulturist - special programs, The Texas A&M University System

- *Other materials*, which can be used, include sod removed from the lawn, hay, weeds, shredded newspaper and hedge clippings. Large twigs break down slowly so do not use them. Bone meal is a good addition to the compost pile because it is high in nitrogen.

Compost Requirements

To prepare compost, organic material, microorganisms, air, water and a small amount of nitrogen fertilizer are needed. Organic material is leaves, grass clippings, etc., added to the pile. Microorganisms are small forms of plant life, which break down the organic material. A small amount of garden soil or manure provides sufficient microorganisms. The nitrogen, air and water provide a favorable environment for the microorganisms to make the compost. Air is the only part which cannot be added in excess. Too much nitrogen can kill the microbes; too much water causes insufficient air in the pile.

Enclosure

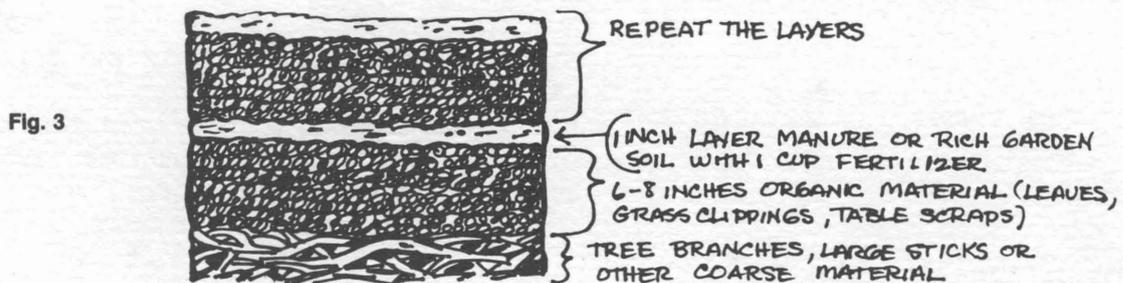
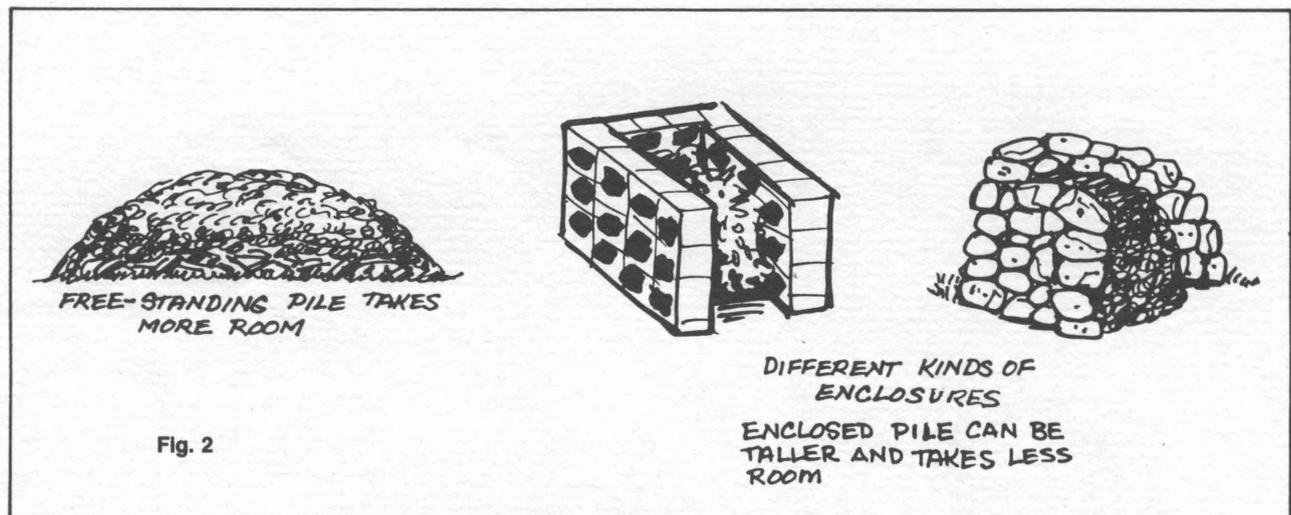
Leave the compost pile free standing if adequate room is available. Less room is required if the pile is

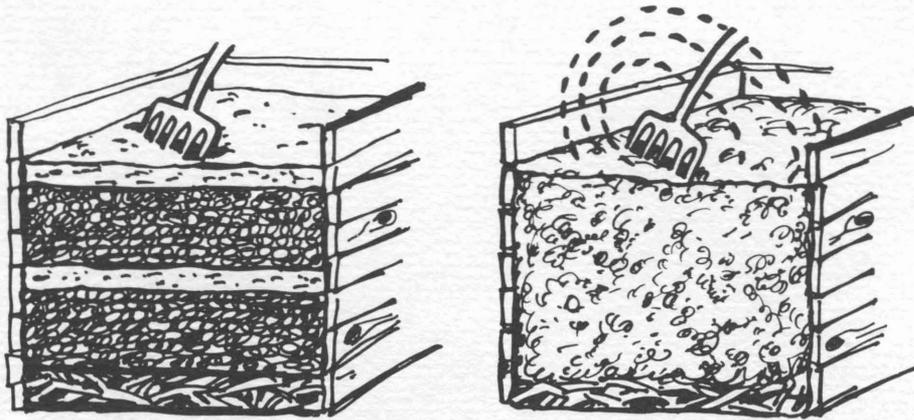
enclosed (figure 2). Wire fencing, cement blocks, bricks or scrap lumber make a good enclosure. Leave an opening on one side so the compost can be turned with a fork and to allow air to enter the pile. Most gardeners put the pile in a secluded area of the yard near the garden. For best results, the pile should be at least 4 feet square and 5 feet tall after settling.

Building the Pile

The most common method of building a compost pile is in layers (figure 3).

- With this method, place a layer of coarse material such as tree branches on the ground. This allows air to move beneath the pile.
- Next add a 6- to 8-inch layer of organic material such as shredded leaves or grass clippings.
- Then add a 1-inch layer of manure or rich garden soil. This provides ample organisms for breakdown. If manure is used, no additional nitrogen is needed. If soil is used, add 1 cup of garden fertilizer with the soil.





TURN SO MATERIAL FROM THE TOP AND SIDES BECOMES THE MIDDLE. KEEP MOISTURE LEVEL ABOUT LIKE A SQUEEZED OUT SPONGE.

Fig. 4

Repeat these layers and keep the pile moist (figure 4). Stir the pile weekly during the summer and monthly during the winter. The compost pile should be at least 4 feet in diameter to provide the best composting environment.

About 90 to 120 days are required to prepare good compost by the layer method. If you have room, make three piles so you will have one ready to

use, one being filled and one "working" (figure 5).

Keep the pile moist but not waterlogged.

Add a 3-inch layer of compost to your garden before breaking the soil each spring and fall to develop and maintain a good soil environment for your vegetables.

Use the compost soon after it is ready or cover it with plastic to keep excess rainfall from washing out some of the plant nutrients.

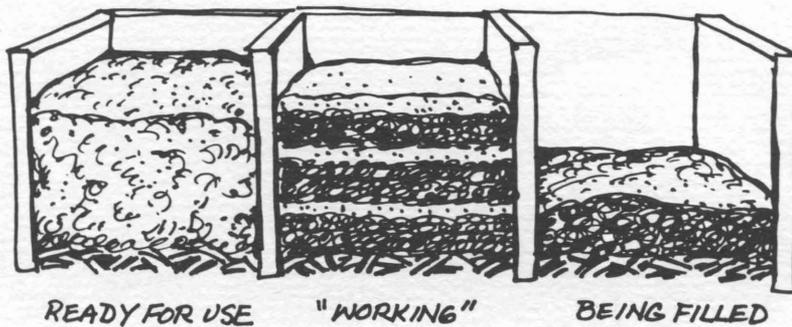


Fig. 5

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