



MIDDLETOWN TOWNSHIP LEAF COMPOSTING...IT WILL GROW ON YOU

WHAT IS LEAF COMPOSTING?

Compost is a natural soil conditioner. When placed around trees and shrubs, compost will increase moisture retention and improve plant growth. Compost or compost-like material can be purchased at many garden shops under the names "soil builder" or "humus." Leaf composting is a natural process of converting leaves and other small garden trimmings into compost right in your own backyard.

WHY SHOULD I COMPOST MY LEAVES?

- 1) It's the law. A Pennsylvania law was enacted in 1990 that makes leaf waste composting a requirement. While Delaware County will compost the leaves of residents who are unable to do their own composting, Middletown Township must make provisions for collecting those leaves and transporting them to the County composting center. Residents who are able to do backyard composting will save the extra expense and personnel time it would cost for collection and transportation.
- 2) Composting is clean and safe. Backyard composting will prevent a number of problems that are associated with curbside leaf collection, such as clogging storm sewer drains, creating slippery roads, or being potential fire hazards.
- 3) Your garden will thank you. When your compost is ready, you will have an excellent soil conditioner — with no cost and no trip to the garden shop.

IS LEAF COMPOSTING DIFFICULT?

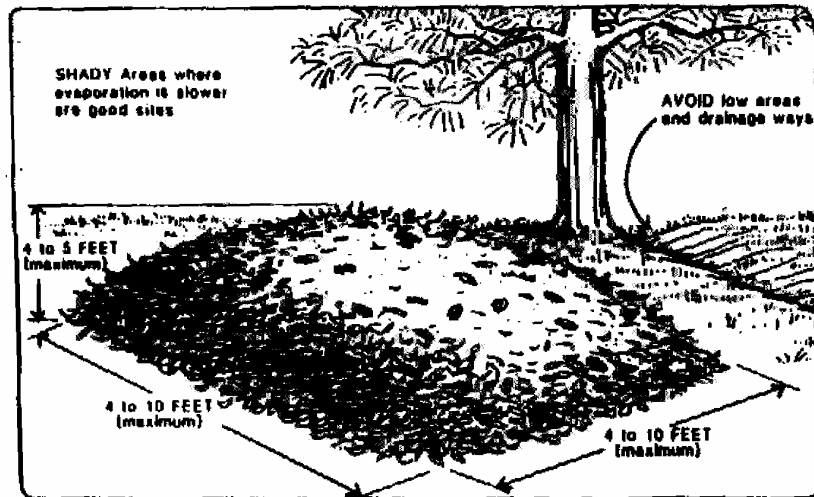
Leaf composting is very easy. All you need is a rake, a shovel, a garden hose and a supply of leaves.

HOW DO I DO IT?

Leaf waste will naturally decompose into humus if left alone outdoors. Composting speeds up this natural process by placing leaves in a pile and controlling the temperature and moisture conditions under which the decomposition occurs. The key to successful composting is simply to make certain that the proper temperature and moisture content is maintained in your leaf pile. To do so, just follow these steps.

1) CHOOSING AN APPROPRIATE SITE

After gathering your leaves, select a place in your yard that is level and does not develop puddles after rain. A pile of leaves should measure between 4 feet in length and width by 3 feet in height (4' x 4' x 5') and 10 feet in length and width by 5 feet in height (10' x 10' x 5'). It is important to keep the pile within these size guidelines for faster decomposition. As the leaves decompose, heat is produced in the pile. If the pile is too small, not enough heat is retained; if too large, not enough oxygen becomes available to aid in decomposition. It is a good idea to choose a site which has a little extra space available in case you need to enlarge your compost pile in the



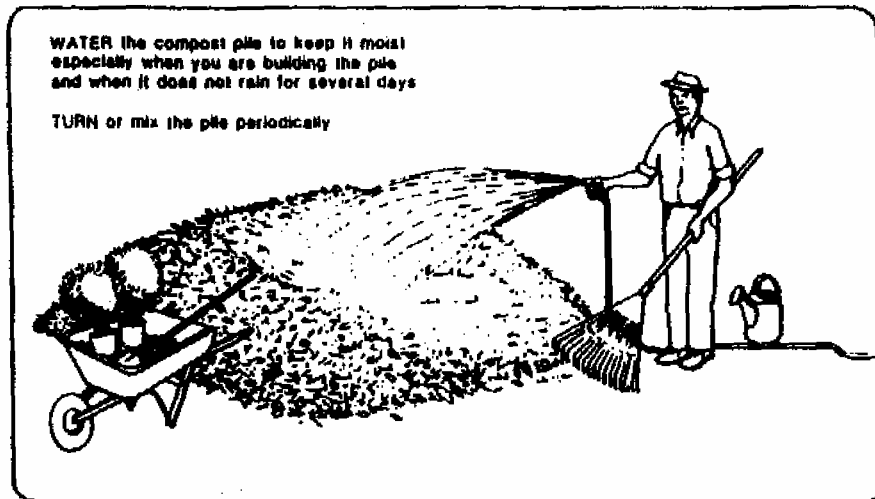
2) BUILDING A COMPOST PILE future.

Rake your leaves as usual and take them to the site selected for the composting pile. You may include very small tree and shrub clippings as well, but do not add grass clippings as they will interfere with the composting process. Do not add any trimmings that have been treated with herbicides.

Do not compact the leaf pile by pushing or standing on it, as too much compaction will prevent proper air flow. The weight of the leaves themselves will provide adequate compaction.

3) MAINTENANCE OF THE PILE

During dry weather all compost piles need frequent moistening with water. (When it is possible to squeeze a few drops of water from a handful of leaves, the pile is sufficiently wet). Also turn the pile over several times to ensure thorough rotting of the leaves. Turning the pile and mixing the leaves also improves air flow and encourages decomposition. It is not necessary to turn the pile during the cold winter months.



WATER the compost pile to keep it moist especially when you are building the pile and when it does not rain for several days

TURN or mix the pile periodically

HOW DO I KNOW WHEN MY COMPOST IS READY?

Compost will usually be produced in 4 to 9 months (in time for spring and summer gardening) if the pile is turned over monthly. Less frequent turning will produce compost at a slower rate. When the material has a rich dark color and a crumbly texture, it is ready for use. Do not be too concerned about an exact time when compost is "ready." Any decomposition that did not occur in the pile will occur after the compost has been applied to your garden.

HOW DO I USE COMPOST?

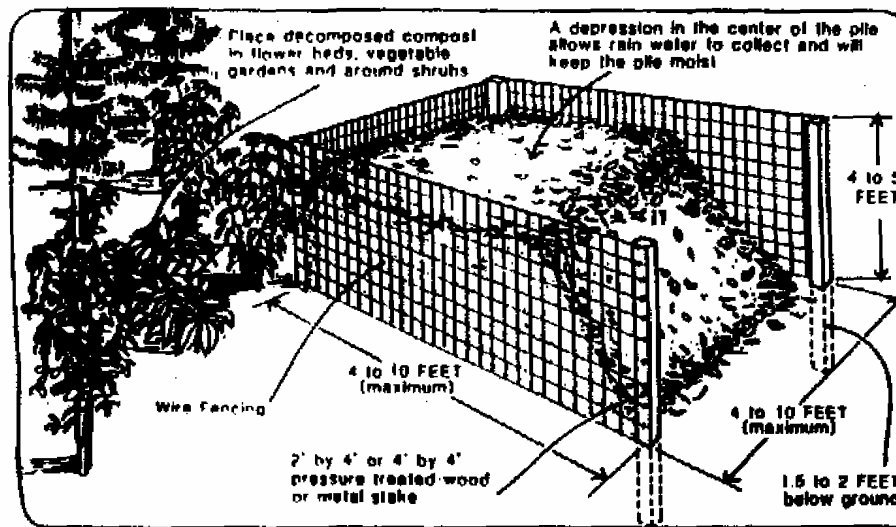
Place the finished compost around trees and shrubs to improve moisture retention. Compost can also be applied to your lawn to improve its soil quality (just make sure it is finely ground so that grass is not smothered). To apply to your lawn, top-dress the grass with a one-inch layer of compost and use a leaf rake to work the finely ground compost into the soil level. Compost can be top-dressed in liberal amounts (usually up to a 4" depth) over flower and vegetable beds and incorporated into the soil before planting. Leaf compost should not be considered a fertilizer. It improves the physical quality of the soil but does not contain very much nutrient content. Once the compost is used, the composting site is ready for the next fall's leaves.

SOME HELPFUL HINTS:

- 1) Some people find it more convenient to enclose the compost pile in a wire fence enclosure (without a roof). Some garden shops sell such enclosures, or they can be easily built to fit into your landscaping. Just remember to make one side removable for easy access. Also avoid wooden materials that attract termites.
- 2) When your compost pile is complete, you might wish to shape a small depression into the top. This will hold rainwater and help keep the pile moist.
- 3) If your compost pile is not decomposing rapidly enough, it may be because of one of the following;
 - the pile is too large, too small, Or too tightly compacted.
 - the pile has been moistened too much or too little.
 - the pile has not been turned adequately.

Even if your pile is decomposing properly, you may want to increase the decomposition rate. Shredding your leaves by running over them with a lawn mower before adding them to the pile will speed decomposition. (Remember to minimize the amount of grass clippings that enter the pile, especially avoiding clippings that have been treated with herbicides or insecticides.)

Another way to speed the composting process is to add a few ounces of a high nitrogen fertilizer to the pile each time you add leaves (about 5 ounces of 10% nitrogen fertilizer for every 20 gallons of leaves). Because the fertilizer increases the acidity of your compost, you should add limestone in amounts equal to the added fertilizer to neutralize the acidity. Add less limestone if the compost is to be used only on acid-loving plants such as azalea and rhododendron.



4) If you notice an odor problem at your compost pile, it may be because of one of the following:

- excessive grass clippings were added to the pile.
- the pile is too moist.
- the pile is too large.

In general, a pile should be turned immediately if an odor problem develops.

5) Leaves blowing from the pile should not be a serious problem because the pile is kept moist. If your pile is in an exceptionally windy area, however, you might wish to place burlap over the pile to contain the leaves.

PREPARED BY:

The text of this brochure has been prepared as part of a research project on recycling and solid waste conducted for the Crum and Ridley Creek's Council of Governments, of which Middletown Township is a member.

Text preparation by Ronald Mersky, Department of Civil engineering, Widener University; and Wayne Norton, Highmeadow Gardens.

Illustrations by Stephen Kuter

REFERENCES:

"Backyard Leaf Composting," Franklin Flower and Peter Strom, Rutgers University Cooperative Extension.

"The Basic Book of Organic Gardening," Robert Rodale (editor), "Compost" chapter, Rodale Press, 1971.

Rev. 10/02

