

## Put Those Fallen Leaves to Use

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If you are lucky enough to have some mature trees where you live, you may be dreading this time of year where the very same leaves that reduced your energy bill in the summer have now fallen to the ground, leaving a “mess” to clean up. Did you know that seasonal yard waste can account for 20-

80% of the volume of collected solid waste?

Recycling that yard waste by composting is not only an environmentally-friendly way of disposal but can also add organic material back into your gardens.



Composting is simply the decomposition of organic materials by bacteria, fungi, worms and other organisms. This organic material may include leaves, grass clippings and kitchen waste. When added, compost improves the health and structure of both sandy and clay soil by improving the water and nutrient holding capacity. It can also be used as a potting soil or mulch; some even brew it to make a compost “tea” for plants.

Successful composting depends on providing food, moisture and air for the microorganisms that break down the materials. There are compost “starters” for sale that contain microorganisms, but they occur naturally in the yard wastes, so they are often unnecessary.

The food for the microorganisms is either carbon-rich “brown” material or nitrogen-rich “green” material. The microorganisms need a mix of both to thrive. Brown materials include leaves, twigs, chipped branches, and sawdust. Reducing the size of the brown materials by cutting, chipping or shredding will accelerate the composting process. The green materials include grass clippings, kitchen scraps, manures, inorganic fertilizer, and green plant parts. A quick tip on how to collect kitchen scraps is to keep a container with a lid on your counter and take it to be composted after it fills up. Do not compost meats, fats, dairy products, or dog, cat, or human feces.

It’s easy to make a compost pile. Choose a partly sunny area near a water source. Since the microorganisms generate heat to break down the material, the pile should not be less than 3 feet high and 3 feet wide. Add layers of green and brown materials and moisten each layer. Turn the pile occasionally and add more water if it dries out. If you don’t do this, it will still decompose but it will take longer. The compost should be ready in 2 to 12 months or when the plant parts are decomposed.

There are commercially available compost bins as well. Compost tumblers are a closed-bin system that is on a support that can be spun to mix the compost. If you have animals roaming around, this might be a better option. Some models have dual compartments so one batch can be added while the other is “cooking.” Compost bins is another closed-bin system that normally has an open bottom that sit directly on the ground. Turning the compost is normally not feasible and the finished compost is removed from the bottom. For free backyard compost bins, contact Alachua County at (352) 374-5213 or the City of Gainesville (352) 334-2330.

After making a compost bin or pile, you may have leftover leaves. You can simply pile them up as mulch on your plant beds or around trees. This will keep out the weeds as well as add organic material back into the soil. If you can't stand the look of them, you can always top them with a little decorative mulch in the spring.

For more information, visit “Compost Tips for the Home Gardener,” <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep323>.

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