



Utility EXPLORATION CENTER

Where utilities meet life

Composting and Mulching Basics

Q. How do I prevent rodents or other animals from invading the compost piles?

A. You can prevent unwanted critters in the compost pile by keeping it moist; avoid putting in meat or dairy products and burying vegetable scraps. You can also add hardware cloth (wire mesh) to the bottom to discourage burrowing rodents.

Q. I normally wait until the temperature starts to drop in my compost bins before turning them. Is this process ok, or would it be better to turn weekly like recommended in the presentation?

A. Waiting for the temperature to drop is fine if you don't want to turn frequently.

Q. It is my understanding that you should not use grass clippings if you have used clopyralid broadleaf herbicide on your lawn. Is that an issue on Placer County?

A. Adding lawn clippings with chemical herbicides to the home composting system should be avoided in any area. Clopyralid is a problem in composting because it is difficult to decompose.

Q. I got my first compost bin and haven't turned the bin frequently. How do you determine if the compost is good - even if everything is unrecognizable?

A. The compost is good even if you didn't turn it very often. It should have a nice earthy smell.

Q. Is it possible to use a designated plastic trash bin as a compost container (as opposed to buying an earth machine or tumbler)? If so, how do you prep the bin?

A. It is possible to use a trash can so long as you can get a 3x3x3 size. If you live in the City of Roseville you can get a recycled trash toter for free by calling (916) 774-5780.

Q. How do worm bins and worm castings fit into composting? Is it best as a separate system?

A. Composting with worms (vermicomposting) is a separate composting system. You will need a special type of worm (Red Wigglers) for vermicompost and they are kept in a small bin with bedding and fed just kitchen scraps.

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Q. I had heard that if you want to encourage worms in compost, best to not include citrus. Is that true?

A. Adding citrus to a compost bin is fine and should not affect the worm because they can move away from materials that they find too pungent.

Q. We use wood shavings in our chicken coop. Is it okay to add the “soiled” wood shavings to the compost bin? Would that be considered brown?

A. Adding the shavings and manure from a chicken coop is great for the compost bin. The shavings are a source of carbon (browns) and the poop is a source of nitrogen (greens).

Q. How do you use your three bin composting system? How often do you turn, and how often do you move from one bin to the other?

A. The 3-bins system is set up to have one compartment to hold material to be compost, a compartment for active composting, and a holding bin. I have included a handout with tips for using a 3-bin system.

Q. I can't get rid of what look like fleas around my compost bins (commercial composter with 2 bins). I keep adding straw to reduce moisture but doesn't seem to help. I'm also getting to the top of the bin and can't add much more.

A. What you probably have are fruit flies or even fungus gnats, both are harmless and apart of the composting process. It's difficult to identify an insect unless I can see them. If your bin is full don't try to add more material, it's time to let it “cook” (decompose) and just keep it turned.

Q. Do you need to sprinkle lime or other things on the compost pile?

A. No

Q. Is it safe to compost in a plastic container? Is the plastic leeching chemicals into the compost?

A. It depends! Most compost bins are constructed of PVC or recycled plastic and will work fine without problems.

Q. I heard not to use paper/cardboard that has print on it, but you mentioned cereal boxes. Can you clarify?

A. Items like cereal boxes are commonly known as chip board and are safe to use in the compost bin (shred first). Most inks that are used now for printing are either soy or vegetable based.

Q. How often do you turn your compost if you are constantly adding to it (cold composting)?

A. Each time new material is added to the bin you can give it a turn especially if adding food scraps.

Q. Are excess green onion or leeks okay to use?

A. Sure, just make sure to have a balance of carbon to go with all that nitrogen.

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Composting and Mulching Basics

Q. How do you keep mulch from being blown away, especially when blowing leaves?

A. That's a tough one. Rocks won't be affected by a blower, and you should have luck with the larger bark chips. Lightly rake your leaves off your mulch leaving a layer to decompose feeding the worms, helpful bacteria and releasing nutrients back into your soil.

Q. What do you think of the bigger redwood chips as mulch?

A. Well, it depends. How big is big. You want the chips small enough to break down over a few years' time. It's recommended not having chips larger than 4".

Q. What about using plain cardboard as a weed barrier? Then putting compost on top of that and potting soil. What do you think?

A. Cardboard works well. Cut your weeds down as close to the soil as you can and cover with compost. Place your cardboard over that and top with mulch. Keep moist. The area will be ready to plant in 3-4 months. To keep the weeds at bay, reapply mulch as needed for that 2"-4" recommended depth.

Q. We've been collecting cardboard for a weed barrier, but some has ink on it. Is that okay?

A. It's ok as long as it's printed directly onto the cardboard. Remove all labels, tape, etc.

Q. Is a layer of bark considered a type of "mulch" also?

A. Bark is an excellent mulch as it retains moisture, and as it breaks down, adds nutrients to the soil. Remember to keep your depth between 2"-4".

Q. Can you put cardboard or newspaper around tomato plants with mulch on top?

A. Certainly! Keep the cardboard and mulch a few inches away from the plants to prevent rot.