

## Let's Talk Gardening

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Tom Harris, Ph. D.

The Country Gardener

### The Compost Pile

Last week I mentioned that I'd give you a little information about a compost pile this week. It's a very timely topic because all the live oak leaves are falling. Please don't bag and get them hauled to the dump...all those you sent last year are still there as are those that people have been sending for years now. You see, when you put leaves in a bag and then cover them with dirt so that no air, moisture or sunlight can get to them, they just lay there and do nothing. They can't decompose under those conditions. I've heard that about 40-50 percent of the dumps around here are made up of nothing but leaves.

If you're like me and cleaning out all the dead stuff around the yard, pruning a little, and generally cleaning up the yard and various beds, your yard-waste pile is starting to grow. What we have to do now is get serious about making compost out of it by shredding it and getting started. I've been putting off the shredding for months now so I've got quite a pile to do. Nothing organic ever leaves my yard.

If you have a shredder, grind up all your stuff and start helping Mother Nature do her job of decomposing it. My shredder reduces yard waste 12:1; that is, for every 12 bushels of stuff I put into it, I'll get 1 bushel out. That makes a big difference when it comes to working the compost piles later on.

I use fence wire for my composting pens because it's so easy to move it and work the compost. The wire I buy is the kind with 2" x 4" squares in it and 36 inches tall. Since I need to know when I have about 6 inches in the pen, it's easy to see; i.e., it's just one and a half squares. I cut the wire to about 12-15 feet long and when I cut it off the roll, I leave the "fingers" sticking out and then turn them back like fingers turned back to your palm. Then when you make a circle of the fencing, the fingers will hold it in place.

If you don't have a shredder, use the lawn mower. Just pile the leaves up in a long row and mow over them 2-3 times. Each time you mow, the pieces get smaller and smaller and that's what you want. If you have a bagger on the mower, that's a good start, too. After you shred the stuff for the compost pile, start putting it in the pens and when you get about 6 inches in the pen, put about a shovelful of either soil or manure on the top to add the soil micro-organisms and then wet it down really good so that it's moist all the way through. Keep adding 6-inch layers and wetting them until the pen is full and then round off the top.

In about 3-4 days the pile will start to heat up to the point that you can't hold your hand in the middle of the pile about a foot down—it's too hot. That's good. It's "cooking." This cooking process kills disease-causing organisms and weeds seeds and generally sterilizes the compost.

After about 10-14 days, the pile will start to cool down—you can feel it if you stick your hand in it again or you can test it with a thermometer...I use an old meat thermometer. Remove the pen, set it beside the pile and turn the compost into it again; start by putting the outside layer of the pile into the pen first. Finish by putting the center of the pile in last. That way, it'll all be cooked about the same amount. Be sure to wet the pile again because the microbes need the moisture to do their thing; but you don't have to add anything else. After you've turned it three times, it should be to the point that you can't tell what it used to be. Then it's done. TADA!!! You just saved a bundle and made some of nature's best additive for your gardens and pots.

The absolute best thing you can do to make your soil more viable and better for all the plants is add compost. In all the beds add from 2-4 inches and work it in as deeply as you can. On the lawn, add only about a half inch—more will smother the grass. Water it in so that the compost reaches the soil. In pots, use about 1 inch on top of old soil. Now, every time you water, you'll be adding just a little compost tea to the water. Your plants are gonna love ya for it.

Send your ideas, questions, or comments to: [gardener@gytc.com](mailto:gardener@gytc.com)