

Column Name – The Heartland Minute

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“Composting 101 – Part 1”

Composting is a beneficial tool for gardeners to save money with their garden operation. In addition, it is great for recycling and reducing the amount of solid waste in the landfill to help improve the environment. Compost can be made from waste such as leaves, grass clippings, manures, straw, hay and garden refuse. You can either utilize it as a mulch around shrubs and young trees, or mix it into the soil in vegetable and flower gardens. This process of composting converts organic wastes to rich humus and involves several types of bacteria and fungi. These organisms will break down the complex molecules in the residue you are composting.

To get started you want to place your compost pile in a place that is not prone to standing water, but be sure and have a water source near your pile because you will need to keep it moist to aid in the composting process. There are different options you can utilize to start your composting pile. One way is to use woven wire or wood slat fence. Often you can find pallets free, which work great to build a frame. You can use finer wire if posts support it, but I encourage you to use a heavier gauge wire. Another option for building your composting pile is to use cement blocks or bricks. Be sure to use heavy enough blocks that can handle the pressure from the pile. As a note, do not use high quality lumber for whatever structure you build as the moisture may ruin the boards. The use of redwood or cypress is best.

Your structure size will vary based on the amount of space you have available. If you do not have much space, you can talk to your neighbors or friends to pick a community composting location. The most common composting structure is rectangular or square, but it can also be round, which takes up less space and do not dry out as fast. A sufficient size is 5 feet wide by 5 feet long, or 5 feet in diameter for a circle. An efficient way to compost is to have three bins. One for last year's compost, another to accumulate the current year's waste, and a third to use as a place to turn your compost pile over.

Once your structure is built, the plant materials you can add include leaves, grass clippings, weeds or garden refuse, fine hedge clippings, straw, corncobs, sawdust, old hay, and mulch removed from flower or vegetable gardens. Do not add severely diseased plants. Your compost pile is great for scraps like eggshells, or peelings. Be sure to keep them covered to avoid drawing flies. To make a hot compost pile, start with 6-8 inches of “brown” materials such as straw, old mulch, or tree leaves. Add a 2-3 inch layer of “green” materials such as grass clippings, coffee grounds, weeds, kitchen waste, or freshly harvested plant material. Alternate these layers until the pile is 3 to 5 feet high. You will need to add moisture after each layer. This article will continue with compost utilization in the next Ag Agent article “Composting 101 – Part 2.” In the meantime, happy composting!

As a reminder, Greenwood County and the Rolling Prairie District will be hosting a Drought Program to be held at the Severy Community Center on October 11th at 6pm. The meeting is free to attend with a meal provided. The meal is provided by Ranchland Feed, an ADM Alliance Nutrition Dealer, and Sowder Seed. Topics to be covered at the meeting will include feedstuffs and projecting forage inventory needs; management strategies to avoid nitrate and prussic acid poisoning; considerations for feeding cows and backgrounded calves with limited forages and health concerns.

Information from article from KSRE Making Compost: A Beginner's Guide Article.

For more information regarding Agriculture and Natural Resources, 4-H Youth Development, or K-State Research and Extension call the office at 620-583-7455, email me, Ben Sims, at benjam63@ksu.edu, or stop by the office which is located inside the courthouse. Be sure to follow K-State Research and Extension- Greenwood County on Facebook for the most up-to-date information on Extension education programs and the Greenwood County 4-H program.