Composting improves the environment and home garden

K-State horticulture agent shares tips on composting

K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Composting is a simple way to keep the home garden healthy while also helping the environment, but there is a certain art to doing it right, said Dennis Patton, a horticulture agent in K-State Research and Extension’s Johnson County office.

“The science is making sure the composting process works,” he said, “and the art part of it is figuring out what works for you.”

Patton said compost can be any dead plant or animal matter, but don’t be fooled by the definition.

“We put dead stuff in the compost, but the compost is very much alive,” he said. Within the compost pile, there are live microorganisms that feed off dead matter. Managing the microorganisms is the key to composting, Patton said.

Patton said compost consists of a mixture of green and brown matter, both of which are key to making the microorganisms “happy.”

Brown matter is the source of carbon, and the bulk of what gardeners use in the compost pile; it includes dead leaves and other garden waste. Green matter is the source of nitrogen and somewhat harder to find; it can be grass clippings, vegetable and fruit scraps and animal manure.

Patton recommends about 2/3 brown matter to 1/3 green matter.

Some materials should not be used in compost, he said. Pet feces -- especially cat and dog feces -- should not be used. Nor should food waste that contains fats or oils.

Also, grass, hay or manure from a pasture that uses herbicides should not be added to the pile. Patton said these materials can all taint the compost and damage plants.
Once safe materials are available for compost, Patton said there is not really a bad location for the pile, but he suggests avoiding a low area that will collect water -- which can cause a bad smell.

To maintain the compost pile, Patton suggests watching for the development of heat within a week to 10 days of its initial construction. “If the compost pile is properly constructed, that internal part of the pile should be reaching up to 140 degrees Fahrenheit or more.”

Once the pile begins to cool down, it is time to turn the materials, a process that distributes moisture. Eventually, the pile will heat up again, then turned when it cools.

Patton said it may take between 3-6 months to form compost, but he adds, “the more you leave it in the back corner and leave it up to Mother Nature, it may take a year or more until you have compost.”

K-State Research and Extension offers several online resources on composting. Additional information or questions can be directed to your local K-State Research and Extension office.

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