

Newton Composts

By Sally Zuar/Special to the TAB

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Curbside recycling of paper, cans, and bottles has become a routine environmental practice for Newton residents. More recently, environmentally-concerned residents have been encouraged to practice composting, which allows for the reuse of food scraps, lawn waste, and other surplus materials.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, Massachusetts residents fill enough trash bags each year to circle the planet two-and-a-half times! Although two-thirds of our trash could be recycled or composted, only one-third of it actually is. Composting not only reduces public waste, but also enriches the soil, helps grow healthy garden and house plants and decreases local disposal costs.

Some residents are still hesitant to get on board. Perhaps they just need help getting started.

Composting is easy and can be adapted to fit your lifestyle. Set up your compost bin in a shady area with good drainage. Start the pile with a layer of coarse material, such as sticks, straw, or corn stalks. Add alternating layers of "browns" and "greens". "Browns" include fall leaves, straw, shredded paper, sawdust, pine needles, etc. "Greens" include grass clippings, vegetable and fruit wastes, eggshells, tea bags, coffee grounds and filters, etc. Do **not** add meat, fat, grease, or dairy products, as these will attract unwanted animals. Other materials to avoid are ashes, cat and dog manure, diseased plants, and weeds.

To ensure best results, fluff your pile with a hoe or pitchfork to create air passages. Lack of oxygen in the pile will slow down the composting process and may generate unfriendly odors. Moisture is an important component. The pile should be damp, but not dripping wet. When adding leaves to the pile, make sure that they are damp. And add a little water during dry spells.

It can take anywhere from a few months to a few years for waste to turn into compost. The more frequently you mix the pile, the faster it will turn to compost. When composted materials are rich brown in color and have an earthy smell, the compost is ready for use. Compost can be applied on the top of lawns and garden beds and works well when mixed with the first four inches of soil before planting.

When poor soils begin to lose critical nutrients, compost regenerates the earth by improving drainage and moisture absorption and encouraging the development of beneficial bacteria and fungi that break down organic compounds to create a rich, nutrient-filled material. Compost has been proven to suppress plant diseases and pests, thus reducing the need for hazardous chemical fertilizers that wash off your garden. Those chemicals find their way into the nearest river, lake or stream where they promote algae growth that deprives the water of oxygen, leading to a marked decline in aquatic life.

Compost helps remediate contaminated soils by absorbing odors and treating semi-volatile and volatile organics compounds (VOCs) such as petroleum fuels, paint thinners, and dry cleaning solvents. VOCs harm the environment by damaging soil, contaminating groundwater, and reacting with nitrogen oxides and sunlight to form ozone, an air pollutant that poses serious risks to respiratory health. Compost also binds heavy metals and prevents them from contaminating water resources or being absorbed by plants. Compost also degrades noxious wood preservatives, pesticides, and hydrocarbons (a major air pollutant).

The most visible benefit of composting is its diversion of organic material from landfills and garbage disposals, thus reducing the production of the greenhouse gas methane at landfills, saving water used by disposals, and reducing the overload at sewage treatment plants. Finally, composting provides economic benefits by reducing the need for water, fertilizers and pesticides.

With a little time and effort, you could soon be on your way to enhancing the growth of your garden and preventing harmful chemicals from contaminating the planet. More information can be found at www.epa.gov and at www.ci.newton.ma.us/DPW/recycling/Composting, where you can learn how to purchase a composting bin.

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