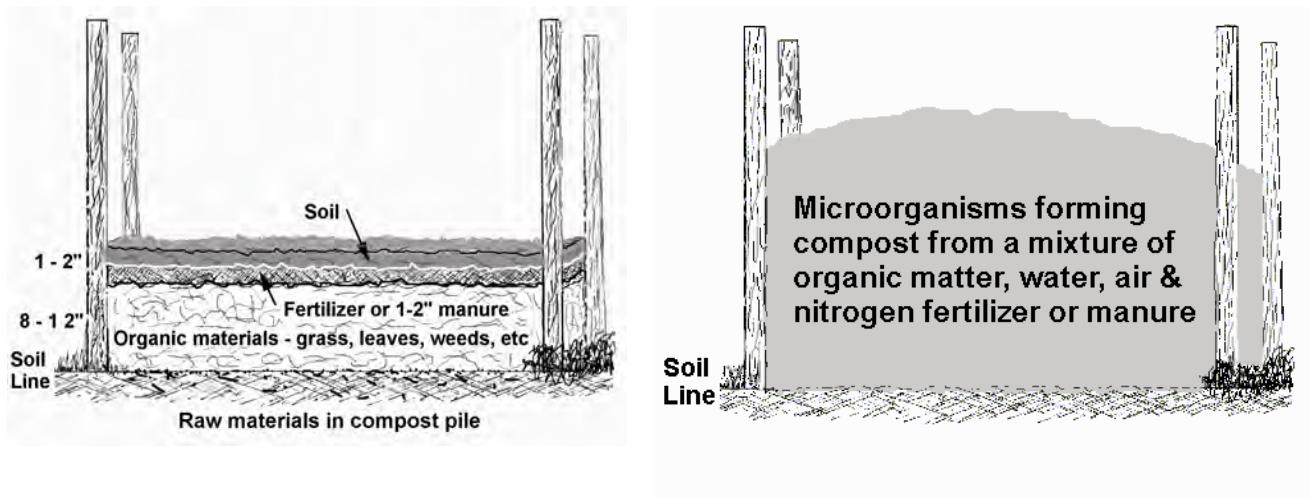


Fact Sheet 00-17

A Quick Guide to Composting

Dr. Wayne S. Johnson, State Horticulture Specialist



Make compost by alternating layers of organic matter (OM), soil, nitrogen fertilizer and lime (use lime only if your soil is acidic). Follow this procedure:

- Make the compost pile 4 or 5 feet square and several feet tall, 4 to 5 feet is best. Structures are not necessary, but may be used.
- Organic Matter: Add 8 – 12 inches OM, anything from plants or animals (yard wastes, table scraps, manures) except diseased plants, course woody material and bone that is slow to decompose. Do not include meat, which may smell and attract vermin. Do not use cat and dog manure. Use about 50 percent green and brown OM. The finer the OM the quicker it makes compost. If you can run it through a shredder, do so.
- Soil: Soil, 1 – 2 inches, supplies microbes to decompose the organic matter. Commercial starters are not needed.
- Nitrogen Fertilizer: Add to each 5 by 5 foot layer of OM and soil $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of a low analysis nitrogen fertilizer, less than 25% nitrogen. The microbes that decompose the organic matter need nitrogen to grow.

- Lime: Lime is not necessary if alkaline desert soils are used. They raise the pH naturally. Where acid forest soils are used, add ½ to 1 cup lime to each 5 by 5-foot OM layer. Lime raises the pH of the compost. An overly acidic condition slows the growth or kills many beneficial microorganisms that decompose the OM.
- Water: Sprinkle the OM lightly. Moisture is required for the microorganisms to grow. DO NOT OVER WATER or anaerobic microorganisms will slow decomposition and cause the pile to stink! If this happens, turn the pile and reduce the amount of water applied to it. In our dry climate, you may need to cover the pile to keep it moist.

Water and mix the layers of OM, soil, fertilizer, and lime (if used) together as you make the compost heap. Turn the compost pile in on itself every few weeks and water regularly to keep the process active. The compost is ready when it turns dark brown, the individual leaves and other OM are indistinguishable and the whole has a sweet earthy odor. Use it to improve your soil and plant health. Lightly cover seeds with compost to keep them from drying out and hasten a more uniform germination.

UNIVERSITY
OF NEVADA

The University of Nevada, Reno is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, creed, national origin, veteran status, physical or mental disability, , or sexual orientation, in any program or activity it operates. The University of Nevada employs only United States Citizens and aliens lawfully authorized to work in the United States.