

Composting Over Winter



Homemade compost may be the single best way to add nutrients and organic matter to both your flower beds and vegetable gardens. Using a stationary compost bin or one with several bins can allow us to continue to 'make' compost all winter. Yes, it works!

Many gardeners assume that their composting duties are complete when they pile up leaves in the fall. In this composition, it will make a good mulch for putting around plants which helps with water retention and weed control. While this will improve one's overall plant health and appearance, it does not provide all the benefits of composting.

Just a quick review of composting will help to show the few things we need to tend to in the winter months. Basically, composting is assisting micro-organisms in breaking down the carbon "browns" (leaves, shredded newspaper, etc.) and the nitrogen "greens" (lawn clippings, kitchen scraps, etc.) to yield a soil rich in organics, carbon, and nitrogen.



Two particularly important things we need to remember about composting are 1) the micro-organisms work better when hot and moist and 2) turning the pile helps the physical breakdown of the material and distributes moisture. If we do not take care of these two composting chores, then we may wind up with just a pile of partially decomposed leaves for a while. They will eventually break down, but it will take much longer to do so.

As we know, Oklahoma winters can be extremely dry. It takes about 5" of snow to equal $\frac{1}{2}$ " of rain. And the average January and February temperatures in Oklahoma are well below 60°. So, what do we do to make sure our compost pile stays warm and damp? Watering while you turn the pile is a great way to distribute moisture. In extremely cold weather, one might cover the compost with black plastic to use the solar rays of the sun to generate the needed heat. The key is to not get 'too wet' or 'too hot' - shoot for warm and damp. If you are asking worms to help with your compost, you will not need to turn the heap as often. But remember, worms do not like it hot - just warm.



Feel free to continue adding material to the pile throughout the winter. Shredded newsprint can be added for “browns” and kitchen scraps can be added for “greens”. Work your compost pile over the winter months and your plants will love you in the spring!

Some excellent references are available through the local OSU extension office, such as:

[Fact sheet HLA-6448:](#) Backyard Composting
[Fact sheet PSS-2911:](#) Compost Turning: The Key to Quick Composting

Also, a great, informative article “Dishing the Dirt” is on the Tulsa Master Gardener website:

[dishing-the-dirt-report-online-version-5761b22671f1c.pdf \(saskwastereduction.ca\)](#)