



A weekly question/answer column

Can I Recycle Garden Waste Without Composting?

Jerry Goodspeed answers:*

Most garden waste is useful without composting it. Think of it as pre-composting. Using garden waste can reduce the flow of green material sent to the landfills, improve the soil and increase the health of most plants. Here are some ideas to try before sending yard waste to the dump or the compost bin.

- Grass-cycling. The easiest way to reduce yard waste is to leave the grass clippings on the grass and not bag them. It is a great way to return nutrients and organic material to the soil. It reduces the water requirements of the lawn and cuts mowing time significantly. Grass-cycling does not increase the thatch layer and can be beneficial to the soil.
- Use grass clippings as a mulch. Save grass clippings for your vegetable or flower garden. Later, the clippings can be worked into the soil, which improves tilth and workability. However, they should be dried before being used as a mulch. Do not pile wet, fresh clippings more than an inch deep at a time or they will turn into a stinky, sticky mess.
- Shred leaves. Shredded leaves in the fall can be used as a mulch around the trees, shrubs and perennials. By spring, the leaves decompose and add precious organic matter to the soil. Leaves can be shredded by running over them with a lawn mower. This is usually easier than raking them up, even though it makes a lousy leaf pile for jumping.
- Work leaves into growing areas. If the leaves are shredded first they are easier to rototill, but shredding is not required. Adding some nitrogen into the area will speed decomposition.
- Use evergreen needles for mulch or a soil amendment. They will acidify Utah's alkali soils while increasing the organic content. Conifer needles break down slowly but still improve the soil over the long haul.
- Shred all dead annual plants. After they are shredded, they can be worked into the garden or flower beds. The lawn mower works well for this, too. Be careful of annuals that reseed themselves, though. They can become weeds in a garden. These include marigolds, snapdragons, cosmos, calendula and alyssum.
- As a last resort, compost. The most productive method is to build a compost pile and compost all garden, yard and kitchen waste. Composting is a lot easier than most people believe and, if done correctly, has no unpleasant odor. Compost is the best soil amendment, improving the tilth, workability, drainage and nutrient holding capacity.

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