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Rot Your Way to a Healthier Garden

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GARDEN NOTES

ROT YOUR WAY TO A HEALTHIER GARDEN

By Dennis Hinkamp

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General-04

You can only garden in the warm weather, but you could be making compost right now.

“I constantly remind people that the most important way to insure a great vegetable garden, flowers, shrubs or trees is to start with good soil,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “I still believe the best way to improve your soil is with compost.”

Making compost is a relatively simple process. Choosing how to compost is the hard part for most people. Too many fancy composters are bought, used once and then become as inactive as a shovel in a teenager’s hand, Goodspeed laments.

“The composter I grew up with was a hole in the ground (known as a pit composter),” he says. “The advantage was it never caused much problem throughout the season. The disadvantage was the smell and removing the compost at the end of the season.”

A tumbler composter has become popular lately, Goodspeed says. They look impressive, take up a small space, can be moved easily, are easy to aerate (which eliminates most odors) and produce compost relatively quickly.

The disadvantages of tumblers are that they can be very expensive and may weaken and even break if not constructed well, he cautions. They hold very little compost and have no storage ability. He recommends them for gardeners with a small lot or gardening area.

The bin or box is probably the most common, Goodspeed says. These can be neat in appearance and hold more material than the tumbler. They hold the heat well and, if turned regularly, can produce good compost in a month or two.

“The bin or box can also be expensive to buy or build and is a real pain when it comes to rotating and aerating the materials,” he says. “I have seen hundreds of these composters filled once and then left to sit for the next generation to worry about. I recommend them only for dedicated gardeners who are willing to spend the time turning and working the compost.”

A refinement of the box composter is the triple bin method, Goodspeed adds. Three bins are placed side by side, allowing one for storage and the other two to be used to move the composting material back and forth for aeration. This method can produce an enormous amount

of compost.

“Paul Farber’s tire method is used by many in our area, Goodspeed says. “Four tires are stacked on top of each other and filled with the composting material. The system is relatively easy to aerate, produces good heat for quick composting and is usually inexpensive to make.”

Still, the easiest method is the trench or path method, he says. This method is to simply put the material to be composted into the paths in the garden or in a trench by the garden. In the fall, the material is tilled into the garden and decomposes into the soil over the winter. It can be slimy at times throughout the season and is not exactly neat and orderly in appearance.

There are other composters that have fancy names, but most are just a variation of the basic types, Goodspeed says. All produce compost, which helps improve the soil, which is the real goal.

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