COMPOSTING

for Kids!

by Robert “Skip” Richter
Composting is fun!

It's also easy.

Let's learn about how we make compost and how we use it to grow beautiful gardens.
Nature recycles leaves and plants.

In a forest, leaves fall forming mulch that protects the soil.

Over time they decompose into nutrients that feed forest plants.
You can recycle leaves and other plant materials at home by setting up a compost bin.
First select a spot to set up your bin. It should be out of the way but convenient to reach with plenty of room to work around. Some good places would be near your garden or in a back corner of the yard. It is also a good idea to choose a location close to a source of water.
Now for the recipe for compost. The microorganisms that recycle leaves and other plant parts need an even mix of brown stuff and green stuff to munch on. They also need air and water to live and work. Put all this together and in time you will have compost!
Recipe Ingredients

air
water
brown stuff
green stuff

compost!
Brown stuff is dead, dried plant parts like leaves and pine needles. Brown stuff is high in the element *carbon*. Green stuff is fresh, living parts like grass clippings, kitchen vegetable scraps, weeds and other plants. Green stuff is high in the element *nitrogen*. 

Five Containers of Ingredients
Don't use meat, milk products because pets and other animals may try to dig them up out of your compost bin. Also don't use diseased garden plants. They can spread disease back into the garden later when you use the compost.
It is easiest to build our compost bin in layers of ingredients. Start with the brown stuff by spreading a layer of leaves or pine needles about 6 inches thick.
Here are some sources of carbon along with their carbon-nitrogen ratio. You can use these numbers to better determine how much brown and green stuff you should use to make the best mix for composting. Some things, such as sawdust, are very high in carbon compared to their nitrogen content, while others, such as leaves, are not so high.
Carbon Sources

- Dried leaves 60:1
- Pine needles 90:1
- Newspaper 125:1
- Sawdust 625:1
Next, for the green stuff, add a layer of grass clippings a few inches thick. It is helpful to mix the layers up a little as you make them.
Here are some sources of nitrogen along with their carbon-nitrogen ratio. Once again, you can see that the ratio varies a lot between the different ingredients.
Nitrogen Sources

- Food Scraps 15:1
- Grass clippings 18:1
- Coffee grounds 20:1
- Horse manure 25:1
Then sprinkle a shovelful of soil or compost to add microorganisms to the bin.
Each layer gets a good sprinkling of water to wet the ingredients. It is important to wet each layer as you build it. Repeat each of the layers until the bin is full and then.....
...TAH DAHHHHHHH! the microorganisms will go to work breaking down the ingredients into humus. If you want faster compost, you can mix the ingredients every few weeks but this isn't necessary.
Compost “Critters”

Now tiny microorganisms (that you cannot see without a microscope) go to work breaking down the organic matter into compost. Later, as the compost cools down, you may see larger organisms such as millipedes, sowbugs, earthworms and others. Compost is teeming with living things!
This is compost, the dark, earthy-smelling stuff is rich in nutrients. Plants love it! Let's talk about how to use compost to help plants grow.
You can use compost as a mulch around garden plants, like this rose bush. Mulch protects the soil and shades out weed seeds. Nutrients are washed out into the soil with each rain to feed the roots of plants.
Compost is great for mixing into the soil when you are planting a new plant like this flower! It helps a sandy soil hold moisture and nutrients better and improves clay soils too.
Compost mixed with some sand makes a super potting soil for growing plants in containers.
Another way to compost in the garden is by trench composting.
Start by placing leaves in the trenches between raised beds, or in the pathways through your garden.
By the end of the gardening season these leaves will be mostly decomposed and can be scooped up and placed around garden plants as an excellent mulch. Or, you can mix them into the planting beds to improve the soil.
Compost “Pockets”

Another way to compost in the garden is by making compost pockets. They are easy and fun.
Start by digging a hole about 18" deep. Place fruit, vegetable scraps and coffee grounds from the kitchen in the hole. Don't use meat, fat, milk or eggs because pets or wild critters will try to dig them up for lunch!
Next, cover the scraps with soil to bury them and fill the hole. Now you can make more compost pockets in other locations!
After about a month or two you can plant a flower or maybe a tomato plant on the spot where you make the compost pocket. Then stand back and watch it grow!
The End

by Robert “Skip” Richter
County Extension Director - Travis County
Texas AgriLife Extension Service.