

Composting\_Ideas\_Rules\_2004.txt

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Subject: Composting ideas & rules

My desire to produce mass amounts of compost this year is prompted by the fact that I sit on massive amounts of sand. (Michigan is a sandy peninsula, after all.) A few years ago I tried growing tomatoes, but they didn't grow at all. And being a busy person, I didn't try again...I let my folks give me their excess garden produce. But now I am in the mood to grow things again. And I don't seem to be one who does anything in small amounts. Hence the giant compost pile plan!

My in-laws have horses and we "inherit" horse manure in the spring. Two years ago the first load was delivered and I let it age for a year before we used it for the first time last summer. I talked my equally busy husband into helping me till up a small plot so we could plant 60 pine tree seedlings (an experiment, of course!). We tilled in the aged manure compost and then dressed the top with it as well. Imagine our surprise when those seedlings survived and grew last summer! We lost only a few from drought (yes, I watered) and a few from cat urine (caught the cat in the act, the dirty scoundrel!). This winter, though, the deer found douglas fir "candy" and topped half of my plot before I put up a fence. Anyway...

My second load of horse manure compost is wintering over and I plan to get more fresh stuff in the spring. This spring the plan "springs" into action! I had been interested in learning more regarding the best way to produce compost when a book in a "free" pile at a farm auction this summer plopped into my lap. What a find just when I was looking for the answers! (I do have a small 4' x 4' fence where I deposit all my pulled weeds, but that wasn't the answer I was looking for.) So I actively started "collecting"

materials for the compost pile. Even though I live in the middle of a woods, I never rake the leaves here. They all blow away (imagine that!). So I did the next best thing. When I drove into town last fall, I noticed that all those people who live on their tiny city lots and suburban streets buy paper bags from the city and rake their leaves and twigs and then set them out next to the street for trash pickup. I figured that if they went to all that trouble to collect all that wonderful compost material, why shouldn't I help them by picking it up and taking it home for my compost pile? They were more than happy to relinquish their "trash" and I was ecstatic to collect truck loads of "treasure". My busy husband started rolling his eyes every time I rolled into the yard with another truck load of leaf bags.

"The Complete Book of Composting" by J.I. Rodale is at least two inches thick and full of all kinds of test results and stuff. But here's the bottom line....a basic compost pile is built like this: Plan a compost pile 8 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 4 feet tall. Spread brush on the ground for air. On top of the brush, spread 6 inches of "green" material (leaves, weeds, vegetable garbage, etc). On top of the "green" layer, spread 2 inches of fresh manure (from vegetation eating animals only). On top of the manure, spread a "sprinkling" of soil. Continue layering until the pile reaches at least 4 feet tall. The pile will start "working" and within a few days will reach a temp of over 100 degrees. This will kill all the bad organisms that may have been present and will break everything down. The pile will collapse upon itself and shrink down to about 2 feet tall. After two weeks, turn the pile so that what is on the bottom is now on the top and let sit again for another two weeks. By the end of the month, you'll have usable compost.

The book gave all kinds of suggestions as to what you can use in the pile to produce compost (seaweed, hair, bone meal, sawdust...and the list goes on). I made a deal with the local barber shop to take

their hair once in a while. "Hair, in comon with wool and silk, has a high nitrogen content. If the sweepings from a barber shop were regularly applied to a compost heap, an enormous amount of nitrogen could be saved, since 6 to 7 pounds of hair contain a pound of nitrogen or as much as 100 to 200 pounds of manure. If kept in a well moistened heap, hair will disintegrate as easily as feathers." "The chemical constituents of human hair are nitrogen, hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and sulphur, approximately the same as bone meal which is a popular rose food."

I think I'm going to have a great time composting this year...and proving to my busy husband that that giant pile of leaf filled paper bags overwintering in the yard will turn into something black and beautiful and useful.

Misty