

NRCS **NEWS RELEASE**

United States Department of Agriculture • Natural Resources Conservation Service

Massachusetts State Office

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Backyard Conservation Tip:

Autumn is a good time to start composting

With autumn leaves beginning to fall, now is a good time to think about composting. Instead of sending those leaves to the landfill, why not do what many farmers do and turn yard waste into rich fertile compost that you can use in your garden later? The Massachusetts state office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offers tips and resources for backyard conservationists who want to start composting.

Tip sheets on composting and other backyard conservation practices are available through the USDA-NRCS Massachusetts website at www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov/homeowners.html. For a free color “Backyard Conservation” booklet on how you can practice conservation in your own backyard, just like farmers do on the farm, call 1-888-LANDCARE.

All organic matter eventually decomposes. Composting speeds the process by providing an ideal environment for bacteria and other decomposing microorganisms. The final product looks and feels like fertile garden soil. This dark, crumbly, earthy smelling stuff works wonders on all kinds of soil and provides vital nutrients to help plants grown and look better.

Early fall in Massachusetts is a good time to start composting because of the materials available. For best results, mix materials high in nitrogen such as fresh grass clippings and livestock manure with those high in carbon such as dried leaves and twigs. If you don’t have a good supply of nitrogen rich materials, a handful of general lawn fertilizer will help the nitrogen-carbon ratio.

Composting can be as simple or as involved as you would like, and depends on how much yard waste you have, how fast you want results, and the effort you’re willing to invest. There are two types of composting: cold composting, which requires less effort but takes several months to a year to decompose, and hot composting, which requires more work but results in useable compost in a few weeks.

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With cold composting, you can just pile grass clippings and dry leaves on the ground or in a bin. This method requires no maintenance, but you'll have to wait several months to a year for the pile to decompose. Cold composting works well if you're short on time or have little yard waste. Keep weeds and diseased plants out of the mix. Add yard waste as it accumulates.

Hot composting requires more work, but with a few minutes a day and the right ingredients you can have finished compost in a few weeks. Hot piles must be built all at once in a four to five foot cube and turned regularly. Hot piles can reach 110 to 160 degrees Fahrenheit, killing most weed seeds and plant diseases. Move materials from the outside to the inside and vice versa every day or two to produce compost in about four weeks.

For more details on how to get started in composting, download the "Backyard Conservation" composting tip sheet at www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov/homeowners.html.

On the farm, composting and other waste management practices turn potential waste into a resource that saves money and helps the environment. Producers use livestock manure to fertilize crops. When manure is properly handled, it can be safely applied to the land without the risk of polluting water.

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