

For the love of compost, rich rewards

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Southern Maryland - Let's face it. It's not rocket science. You don't need a degree to do it. My momma used to do it in an old bathtub, although there are specific bins made and sold to do it in as well.

It's composting, and for little more than minimal work, your gardens can be reaping the benefits of it in just a few short years.

All it takes is a concerted effort to place your organic material, egg shells, coffee grinds, teabags, potato peelings, excess cabbage and broccoli and cauliflower leaves and stems, apple peelings, orange rinds—in short, any type of organic waste that usually goes in the trash can, can in fact be recycled into rich fertilizer that rivals anything you can buy.

"Composting adds nutrients to your garden, it improves the soil structure, it also improves the water retention of the soil," said Jennifer Horton, master gardener coordinator for the University of Maryland Extension Service in St. Mary's County. "Of course, the real benefit is, you're creating your own fertilizer.

"It's certainly reducing what is being put into the waste stream," she said.

In the past, the St. Mary's County Department of Public Works has offered high-dollar composting bins at a reduced rate to citizens, but Horton insisted, just like momma's bathtub, you don't necessarily need to be fancy about it.

"People can make a pile," she said. "There are certainly ways of putting more effort into it where you can make compost faster, but there are more passive ways as well. There are certainly different methods."

Along with the normal array of material acceptable to a compost pile are a few you might not consider, including sawdust and grass clippings.

"There's no need to bag your grass clippings up and haul them to the dump," Horton said, "just mix them with your compost."

Things to avoid putting in compost include, meat, any fats or oils, no dog droppings (not good fertilizer!), no salad dressings and no dairy products.

Other than that, the sky's the limit. Without one of the fancy containers that promise compost in a few week's time, you generally see your return from composting over the long haul.

We moved into our house six years ago. The former owner left a few piles of old landscaping stones behind the house. I took those stones and formed a circle about four feet across and went up four or five levels until I ran out of material. Since that time, all of our vegetable matter, egg shells, coffee grinds, potato peelings, all of it, goes in there. At times, the crows scavenge what they will, but in the last three years the yield has really begun to pay off. It's wonderful stuff.

It takes minimal effort, but the rewards are worth it. How you do it is up to you. For momma, the old bath tub worked perfectly fine and the old claw's foot tub accented the entrance to her voluminous garden wonderfully.

Need I say more?

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For more information on composting, contact Jennifer Horton at the University of Maryland Extension Service, St. Mary's County, at 301-475-4120.

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