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Start or Improve Home Compost Bins This Fall

Autumn, with its abundance of fallen leaves, decaying pumpkins, and garden waste, is a great time to start composting, or to improve your home compost system. Fall leaves are a helpful addition to home compost bins, as they add the carbon necessary for effective composting.

Low cost equipment available locally

Composting is easy, and it can be even easier with effective, low-cost compost bins. Franklin County Solid Waste District sells "Earth Machine" home compost bins. The Earth Machine features a door in the bottom that can be opened to shovel out finished compost.

District residents can purchase an Earth Machine from the Solid Waste District for \$50. Residents of some District towns may purchase a compost bin from the Solid Waste District for \$25, due to a subsidized pricing incentive from their towns: Bernardston, Conway, Deerfield, Leverett, New Salem, Northfield, Orange, Wendell, and Whately. To purchase bins, call the Solid Waste District at 413-772-2438.

District residents may also purchase Earth Machine compost bins at the transfer stations in Colrain, Orange, and Wendell (pricing may vary). For pricing and more information on these locations, visit: www.franklincountywastedistrict.org/compostbinsales.html.

The Solid Waste District also sells "Sure-Close" kitchen compost collection pails for \$5 each. This 2-gallon pail sits on the countertop or under the sink to collect compostables before taking them out to the home compost bin or municipal compost collection. The pinholes in the tightly locking lid allow moisture to evaporate, which reduces odor.

Municipal Compost Programs

In addition to home composting, commercial or municipal composting can greatly reduce trash volumes. Commercial composting goes beyond the backyard compost bin by accepting items not recommended for home composting, such as meat, bones, cheese, oily foods, compostable coffee cups, and BPI-certified "compostable plastic" (www.bpiworld.org).

Municipal compost programs at these ten Franklin County transfer stations accept separated food and paper waste free from residents or permit holders: Bernardston (and Leyden), Conway, Deerfield, Greenfield, Leverett, Orange, New Salem, Northfield, Wendell and Whately. (Greenfield transfer station accepts food and paper waste free from any Franklin County resident.)

The food waste and other materials collected in these programs is sent to a commercial compost facility such as Martin's Farm in Greenfield or Clear View Composting in Orange. Residents who utilize these programs can potentially save money by reducing the amount of trash in their "pay as you throw" town trash bags or stickered bags.

How to Compost at Home

In the kitchen, collect fruit and vegetable scraps and peels, eggshells, coffee grounds and paper filters, stale bread and leftover grains. It is not recommended to put the following materials in home compost bins or piles: pet wastes, meat, bones, poultry, fish, dairy, and oily foods such as peanut butter and salad dressing.

When adding kitchen scraps to outdoor compost bins, cover the scraps with leaves, finished compost, or other carbon-rich materials. Covering the kitchen scraps reduces insects and odor and speeds up the composting process.

Ideally, the materials in a home compost bin should be comprised of about 75% “brown” carbon-rich materials such as fall leaves, brown yard waste, straw, used paper towels, ripped up egg cartons, paper bags, or newspaper (printed with water based inks, like this one is); and only 25% “green” nitrogen-rich materials such as food waste, coffee grounds, and grass clippings.

More about leaves: if possible, only add smaller amounts of oak leaves and pine needles to your compost bin. Maple and other local leaves are ideal for composting. Saving fall leaves in a covered trashcan or under a tarp makes it easy to add them to home compost bins all year long.

The composting process needs oxygen; mixing or “turning” the pile every few weeks with a shovel or pitchfork will speed up the compost process. Introduce helpful microorganisms to your bin by adding a few shovelfuls of garden soil or finished compost. Add water occasionally to make the contents as damp as a wrung-out sponge.

Compost is ready to use when it looks like crumbly, dark brown, sweet smelling soil. Save money by applying homemade compost to gardens and lawns instead of purchasing bagged garden soils and topsoil. Compost improves soil structure and water retention, adds nutrients and minerals to soil, and reduces waste. Composting reduces climate-changing gases that are emitted from landfills, waste-to-energy facilities, and long-distance trash transport.

For more information, visit www.franklincountywastedistrict.org or contact Franklin County Solid Waste Management District: (413) 772-2438, info@franklincountywastedistrict.org. MA Relay for the hearing impaired: 711 or 1-800-439-2370 (TTY/TDD).