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## Compost happens; here's how you can do your part

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Let's see, we have kitchen scraps, leaves, plus remnants of garden waste. What does all of this add up to besides a lot of work?

Compost.

Gardeners, it's time to start doing something with all of that natural material.

If you have never tried composting, you can do it. Think of it as plant recycling. It is the transformation of organic waste into a soil-like material. And to sweeten the deal, it is a naturally occurring process.

There are benefits to composting. First, it reduces the waste stream. Imagine setting up a composting bin in your backyard rather than hauling all of your yard waste out to the landfill.

Second, compost creates a valuable soil amendment. When added to garden beds, compost does the following

- > Improves soil water holding capacity
- > Improves soil structure
- > Improves and stabilizes soil pH
- > Improves moisture infiltration
- > Adds nutrients to the soil
- > Supplies beneficial micro-organisms to the soil
- > Supplies significant organic matter to the soil
- > Reduces the amount of commercial fertilizer and soil amendments needed to produce healthy plants
- > Reduces the amount of water needed to produce healthy plants

A big question that many budding composters have is, "Yeah, but what can we compost?" That is easily answered. Imagine putting your entire vegetative kitchen scraps, including lettuce, carrot tops, potato peelings, etc., plus coffee grounds and egg shells into your compost pile. In addition, you also can make use of your yard waste. Items such as leaves, grass clippings and vegetative waste such as spent flower blossoms and frost bitten vegetables can go in.

However, there are a few no-no's. These items include but are not limited to:

- > Dairy products
- > Meat
- > Vegetable oil
- > Used kitty litter

Another question that comes up in compost conversation is, "Where should I put the bin? For starters, an area with good drainage is a must. Would-be compost sitting in standing water results in a smelly mess. A sunny area is best, as a shady location may slow down the process. Remember to place your compost bin or pile in a location with access to water, whether by hose or watering can. The materials should be just moist, not sopping wet.

If your pile smells, it means something is amiss. The usual suspects include:

- > Too little oxygen
- > Too much moisture
- > Contents too packed
- > Carbon to nitrogen ratio imbalance

For the first three items, turning or mixing the pile resolves the issue. Otherwise, adjust the carbon/nitrogen materials by adding more carbon (brown) materials, which include straw, dead leaves or even newspaper.

Once you have earthy-looking material, you can work it into garden beds, bringing it full circle from a backyard carrot top to compost aiding the next generation of vegetables.

If you want to begin composting, stop by the Gardens on Spring Creek, 2145 Centre Ave. We are the city of Fort Collins' compost demonstration site. Various composting systems are on display showing what you can buy as well as what you can build. If you don't have the time to build, Soil Saver compost bins are for sale.

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