THE BACKYARD COMPOST PILE

The backyard compost pile is beneficial for your garden – feeding your plants with nutrients, retaining moisture, providing plants cover for winter, and even reducing weeds. And by keeping your food scraps out of the landfill, you will be reducing methane, which is a greenhouse gas produced when organic materials degrade anaerobically (without oxygen) in a landfill. A properly managed pile will reach temperatures of 140 degrees F or more. The following are some tips for composting at home.

You need brown carbon-rich materials (wood chips, dried grass, dried leaves, straw) and nitrogen-rich green materials (kitchen scraps, green leaves, and the like). Don't get overly focused on the ratios of green to brown. Just start with a big pile of brown materials and add your green to it.

1. Compost on the ground, you don't need to buy a bin. Put some fencing around it if you need to keep rabbits, chickens or dogs out of it. Your pile should be at a minimum 1 cubic yard in size. Start with a pile of wood chips, dried grass, straw, dried leaves. If you have trees trimmed by a professional, ask them to chip the wood on site and leave you the chips. This will save you money on the disposal of tree waste. Some trimmers will deliver a load of wood chips to you. Visit the website chipdrop.com, where gardeners needing woodchips can reach out to arborists who need a place to dispose of wood chips.
2. Worried about what to put in the compost pile? Don't be. A well-managed pile creates temperatures high enough to degrade paper products (tissues, paper towels, coffee filters, paper plates), meat, fish, bones, dairy and the small family pet. Some food scraps don't break down quickly, but they help aerate the pile – such as corn cobs and husks. Shredded office paper composts well (avoid clumps), as do paper plates, but you'll need to tear them into smaller pieces. Any yard cleanup materials can go in the compost pile, but if it is in large pieces, it will take much longer to break down. Serious composters will want to get a wood chipper/shredder to facilitate composting yard waste.
    a) A note about weeds: weed seeds are killed in a hot compost pile (140 degrees F). The common backyard compost pile may not reach these temps uniformly. If you are concerned about weeds sprouting from your pile, it's best to avoid composting weeds.
    b) A note about grass clippings – mulch, don't bag. Grass clippings are very nitrogen-rich and must be mixed with a disproportionately large volume of brown materials to avoid creating a smelly mess in the compost pile.
    c) Don't compost dog poop. I've tried, it is extremely difficult.
3. In your 1 cubic yard of brown material (wood chips, leaves, dried grass), add your kitchen scraps. Collect scraps in a bin on the counter. You can use a large coffee can or plastic tub with a lid. Line the bottom with paper – like brown packing paper, tissue paper, newspaper. When full, add water to it and then dump it in a hole dug into the compost pile. Cover it back up. The next time the bin is full, dig a hole in a different part of the compost pile. Alternately, layer the kitchen scraps across your pile and evenly cover with the carbon material.
4. Water and aerate your pile. To compost most efficiently and reduce odors, be sure your pile is oxygenated and watered. Water when you water your garden or grass. It should be damp, but not saturated. Fluff with a pitchfork to keep it oxygenated.

5. What about winter composting? You can compost through much of the winter provided your pile is at least one cubic yard in size. During fall yard cleanup, pile the compost up in a heap. The center of the pile will maintain temps high enough to keep from freezing and you should still be able to dig a hole to dump your kitchen waste into. The key is being able to access your pile – shovel a path to it.
6. Get a compost thermometer if you are really into it. With a thermometer you can monitor the health of your pile. If it gets too hot (150 deg F or more), turn it (don't water it). Low temps indicate it may be time to turn and add water. Monitoring with a thermometer is not necessary, but can improve composting efficiency.

Composting should be free of stress, but it is largely done by trial and error. The steps above are merely a guideline based on personal experience of a Helena area backyard composter. It's a great way to reduce waste while making a beneficial product.

A lot of us feel helpless to improve greenhouse gas emissions, thinking that it is all up to elected officials to figure out. But reducing food waste and composting are two things we can do individually to make a big difference. Other benefits will be in saving money in your grocery bill and trips to the transfer station/landfill.