

# Break it DOWN

Compost is one investment that pays great dividends



Getting the most out of your investments is on everyone's mind these days. While we can put our funds in whatever investment vehicle we choose, once committed we have little or no control over whether it goes up or down. The investment in our gardens is one we do have some control over.

In my garden, there is some commitment of money, but the major investments are time and energy. The results and the path to those results are why most people garden. But there is another potential return on the investment that is increasingly becoming important to gardeners—the compost that can be produced with the leftover flower and vegetable harvest.

Compost happens. You don't have to do anything to make it happen. Unless you take some action to avoid composting, the leaves, trimmings and prunings—all "green waste"—will decompose and become available to be a part of future plants. Unfortunately, a lot of folks who grow things take actions to avoid composting. They bag their grass clippings, leaves and prunings and set the bags on the curb to let someone else take care of the problem. It's my guess those same folks believe spring begins when they buy and apply fresh bags of fertilizer, insecticide and soil builder—some even buy bags of compost.

Let me plead guilty to buying an occasional bag of one soil amendment or another at a local retailer. But before you employ chemical solutions, you should be sure you have't benefit. Another guilty plea is that my education made me a chemical engineer. Therefore, my interest in limiting the amount of chemicals we gardeners introduce into our environment is an educated interest. I'm not just a tree hugger; I'm a tree hugger with portfolio.

## Commit composting

While composting happens without human intervention, it can be made to happen much faster and in a much neater fashion when you organize your ingredients and your composting area. Composting requires four basic things: water, air (which contains oxygen), green matter (which contains nitrogen) and brown matter (which contains carbon). The resulting mixture will heat up and quickly convert the waste

material to produce a sweet-smelling—at least to a garden-er—mixture called humus that can improve the texture and organic content of the soil.

When you start with the intention to commit composting, my first instruction is to relax. No matter what mistakes you make, your garden waste will decompose despite you. I have made most of the mistakes a neophyte can make, and just look at me today. I have taken those mistakes and am using them as a basis for this amusing list of do's and don'ts.

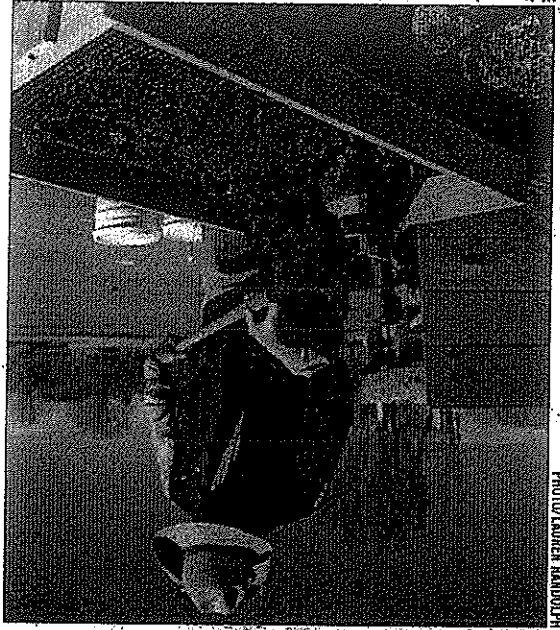
The worst thing that can happen is you can build a compost pile that smells bad. That almost invariably means you have too much water and not enough air. Increase the amount of air by turning the pile. Dry it by adding dry material (e.g. dry leaves or pine needles) as you rebuild the pile, or spread it out and give it time to dry before rebuilding.

"working." Within a day or two, the temperature will decline as the pile is consumed. At this time, composters eager for the fastest production will shovel the pile—most efficiently into a neighboring empty container—so that the outside material is now in the center and add water as needed. The pile should then start "working" again. Repeat this process until all bacteria food is consumed, the heating cycle is over, and the total volume is approximately 50 percent of the original pile.

Let's consider what might happen if you build that same pile and leave it alone. Composting will go on, just slower than if you indulge in all that shoveling exercise, and the outside of the pile will not turn into humus as rapidly as the inside. The name for this lower-exercise kind of composting is called "cold composting."

Nevada soils are relatively low in organic material. Adding compost by tilling it into the top few inches of soil is the best way to improve organic levels. Compost can also be added to the growing medium used for indoor plants or much on top of the soil around trees and bushes.

The best thing to do with excess compost is to share with other gardeners. At the same time, you can teach them how to make their own compost and share it with others—pay it forward. My ambition is that we all form a composting network that might one day make Northern Nevada's deserts bloom. ☞



Writer and compost maker Ronald Shulman sifts his harvest.

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## Reference Chart for Carbon:Nitrogen Ratios of Selected Materials

<i>Material</i>	<i>Carbon:Nitrogen</i> (Averages)
Bark	120:1
Coffee grounds	20:1
Cow manure	20:1
Corn Stalks	60:1
Grass clippings	20:1
Horse manure	25:1
Leaves	60:1
Leguminous plants	15:1
Paper	170:1
Pine needles	70:1
Poultry manure	10:1
Sawdust	500:1
Straw	40-100:1
Vegetables wastes	12-20:1
Wood chips	100-500:1