

Composting

Over the past couple of years, home gardening in southern Nevada has changed – yes, we all still want lovely landscapes, but for many of us, being interested in the back yard has become less an exercise in aesthetics, and more like getting **those food crops** into the earth. Home grown vegetables have turned into Holy Grail of gardening.

Now, anyone who's tried to put a plant into the ground - here in the desert - has no doubt had the same experience as all the rest of us. Unlike gardening in other parts of the world, **here**, the soil fights back. It repels shovels and forks. There really have been times when I rented a jackhammer from the local home store just to get a hole started.

The only way I can see anyone really gardening for vegetables here in southern Nevada is to improve what we laughingly call "soil" around here.

And how can we improve our soil? The best way is by adding compost.

I've had people come up to me and say it's impossible to make compost here in the Mojave. Too hot, too dry, too salty, too alkaline, take your pick. I've even heard people say that since they had no grass clippings there was nothing to put into a compost bin. Well, that's just nonsense.

What is compost? Basically, it's anything that **was** alive but now has rotted beyond recognition. That sounds awful, doesn't it? Let me put it more delicately. Compost happens when dead plant material breaks down until it's turned into the richest, sweetest smelling earth you've ever encountered.

There're several reasons that make compost one of the best things any gardener can use.



Different types of compost bins

Mixing that rich black material into our soil turns it into something where plants will really grow, because it's such a source of fertility. And it helps the soil retain water, so we use less; **and** it gradually lowers the soil pH, which makes some essential nutrients more available to the plants. As if all that weren't enough, adding compost makes the soil more workable, so you can use a fork or a shovel.

The great thing is that compost happens, whether **we** do anything or not. There's no magic, just nature. Our role, as people who compost, is to expedite the process, and make sure our neighbors

aren't offended while it's going on.

All that being said, good composting means that we have to do more than simply accumulate garbage. Good composting means building a balance between wet, potentially smelly ingredients and dry ones. What is my personal favorite **totally easy** compost recipe? Used coffee grounds and tea bags, mixed with shredded newspaper. Keep it moist. Really; it can be that simple, but there is so much else that can go into compost.

Food, for instance. Lots of plant-based foods, like wilted salad greens, apple cores, potato peels, all do great. As long as something hasn't been covered in anything oily, it'll probably be a great addition. Leaves that fall from deciduous trees are fine. Dead plants in general are

perfectly ok, **unless** they died from insect infestation or disease. Then, bag them up and send them to the dump.

Because this is an urban area, it is generally not a good idea to compost animal droppings. These break down but it won't be pleasant – stinky and they attract other animals. I **was** in a conference with someone from Montana and she told me: their state government composts **bear** carcasses. I doubt most local HOA's would approve.

Again, being in an urban area, you'll want to put the ingredients in some kind of enclosure. There are so many to choose from, with prices ranging from less than \$100 to nearly \$400. Most of them will do the job just fine.

Call the Master Gardener Help line for more information.

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