



# backyard

## Giving Composting A Try

by William McClenathan

For years the idea of composting eluded me. There were several reasons, but the main one was a misunderstanding of the workings of composting, not only the 'how to' but the 'why' you need to. I had heard for years the importance of it; keeping weeds down, conserving water, adding nutrition to the soil, helping to make harsh soil more amenable to gardening; these were just the main reasons I had garnered over the years in this industry.

Then, a few weeks ago we did a segment with Jan McNeilan on her compost pile. I have always respected Jan's easy and uncomplicated way of gardening. She and her husband Ray just seem to let all aspects of gardening happen so uncomplicatedly.

After filming the segment, I committed to myself the idea that I was going to start a compost pile.



For many, I think they believe that they do not have the room for a compost pile...that only people with huge gardens can benefit from this process. Nothing could be further from the truth! Certainly, a small garden or yard would need to accommodate those size restrictions, but that is easily done in today's much more green thinking independent garden centers.

The amount of choices seems endless for composters today. Round ones, square ones, wire ones, even ones that you can tumble. There are small ones for your kitchen refuse too. I have even seen them in beautiful ceramic pots so as to not make your kitchen decor less than what you might want it to be. The price range for these pre-made composters is from \$40 up to \$300.



If the cost is prohibitive to you, make your own! A few boards or some chicken wire on posts will work just fine too. The idea is to corral the items you add to your compost pile while they are degrading, so any containment system would work. In Jan's yard (and mine too now) it's just a pile. I did fix a tarp to lay over mine to not only hide it a bit from view but to also keep the dry leaves from blowing everywhere until the process of decomposition occurs.

Once you have settled on what type of composter you will use; now you consider what to put in it. There is nothing tricky about this. Common sense tells us that the woodier the item you put into the pile, the longer it will take to break down. Armed with this knowledge, I choose to put nothing woody into my pile as I have a fire pit in my yard so those items get cut up and used to fuel the fire pit in the months we use that. Everything else goes into the compost pile. Food scraps, clippings, fallen leaves, even pulled



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## Giving Composting A Try...continued

weeds. I would place grass clippings in it too but I have a mulching lawn mower so I do not have any of those, but certainly you could put them in as well. My only caveat would be to use caution if the weeds have gone to seed already or if you have running plants like bamboo, certain types of grasses or perennial plants. The reason is that most home compost piles will not get hot enough to kill those invasive roots and the seeds from the weeds; simply meaning that you may run the risk of spreading more of the unwanted plants around if some caution is not used.



There are any number of additives you can buy to put into your compost bins/piles as well as to facilitate a quicker breakdown. After talking with Jan, I do not see the need for these as much as I used to, but they will not do any harm if you want to use them. They might also be more helpful in the man-made bins, as these types would not get the rain as readily as the open ones do. Your favorite garden center could assist you in answering all those individualistic questions.

One of the main reasons I was reticent to have a compost pile was because of the extra physical labor of turning the pile. Well my friends, Jan doesn't do this at all. I have to admit, this shocked me a bit. Without turning the pile I always thought it would not decompose properly. Also, without that step I could cut down on a big contention I had with composting! There will be those that completely disagree with me on this and I am perfectly ok with that. But the compost that came out of Jan's pile was rich, black and beautiful. All she did was pile it up and a year later...wonderful compost. On a side note here...who 'turns' the natural composting process in nature? The forest floor just keeps piling up and seems to decompose just fine on its own. The process is very similar in your yard.

The last thing is that some people do use a type of sieve to clean their compost before adding it to their gardens. This is mainly to remove any parts of the added materials that have not broken down completely yet. You would not have to do this but if you are using it as a top dressing and not as an amendment that you are tilling in, you may want to go thru that process for visual reasons, so no 'chunks' are showing when you're finished.

I hope this has taken some of the concern over composting away. We often make things more difficult than they need to be. Composting is easy and can really add many positive aspects to your garden. Top dressing with compost can cut down on watering needs, it can also cut down on what goes into landfills and can certainly give you more money to spend on plants rather than having to spend your hard earned cash on buying compost...which in my world is always a good thing!

Whatever your personal choice, your independent garden centers are more than willing to assist you. Please feel free to send your questions to [gardentime.tv](http://gardentime.tv) where we will do our best to help as well.