

gardening  
**Rod Brown**

**Last of six articles.**  
The maple tree in your front yard that you blessed all summer long for its cool shade probably by now is guilty of dumping six garbage bags full of dead leaves all over your carefully tended lawn.

You have raked until the lawn fairly shines. The rather intimidating pile has been jumped in the required number of times by the kids who are no longer interested.

Because you can't burn the wretched refuse in either Wayne or Oakland counties anymore, there are two courses open to you: 1) You can bag the mass neatly for the trashman; or 2) You can spread the pile back out, run over it a few times with the lawnmower and start your own compost heap for next spring.

**Why compost?**  
A soil rich in humus or decaying organic matter is the perfect growing medium for all plants, yielding natural food to the plants, holding water, keeping the soil crumbly so roots can grow easily and allowing necessary air into the soil.

All of these are especially pertinent to the clay we laughingly call soil — clay left over from when they drained the malarial swamps your subdivision

now stands on in Farmington and parts thereof.

It is the acids produced by this decaying organic matter which make soil minerals soluble and, thus, available to plants. The soil microorganisms which produce humic acids need new organic matter to feed on from time to time. Compost, which is partially decayed organic matter, is just what these microorganisms like best.

**HUMUS FORMS** its acids slowly; it is a natural time-release fertilizer that best of all frees you from investing heavily every spring in expensive chemicals. It not only makes itself, but it's natural and free, which, if you share my Scottish ancestry, is one of the most beautiful things about it.

A compost pile needs six basic ingredients: Air, moisture, nitrogen, bacteria, heat and sufficient size. Air is essential for the aerobic bacteria to do their stuff within the pile that causes heat. Hence, the necessity for shredding the leaves. Whole dead leaves mat quickly into a soggy, unusable mess — shredding increases the rotting surface and will help to provide the necessary air spaces.

Turning the pile every week or so will aerate it and will also speed up the total process.

# Create a compost for free fertilizer

Keep the pile damp "like a moist sponge" — too little moisture slows decomposition and prevents the pile from heating up. Its little microorganisms need a steamy environment. Too much moisture, on the other hand, drives out air, drowns the pile and washes out nutrients.

**HEAT IS** a must — 140 degrees F. Not only does this temperature provide the steam bath environment necessary for the bacteria, but it will also kill weed seeds and eliminate any plant diseases possibly carried by the organic material you may be using.

Without the proper scrutiny by committee, sufficient size is the magic final ingredient.

You don't need a three-story-tall pile of unsightly and quietly rotting manure, grass clippings, leaves, orange rinds and tea leaves. A cube about 3 inches on each dimension is the basic minimum to get the required heat. The heat, by the way, and thus the action, will be in the center of the pile — another reason for turning the pile occasionally.

Nitrogen also is necessary for the heating up process. Fresh horse manure, kitchen garbage (egg shells, coffee grounds, citrus rinds — not bones, cardboard, and tin cans), blood meal and grass clippings are all high in readily available nitrogen.

Obviously you aren't going to get a lot of heat in the pile during the winter, but there is still time to get one going before Jack Frost starts nipping at your compost pile.

Properly made and turned, the pile should not smell and will not breed flies. But turning the pile is a must. I made a compost heap earlier this au-

turn, and being too lazy to retrieve a loaned pitchfork, was surprised one dewy Saturday morning by windows on my porch that looked a little too much like a scene from the Amityville horror.

You can buy commercial starters that contain the required bacteria — the little buggers responsible for eating the pile into compost in the first place — or you can toss in a few spadefuls of topsoil from your garden. It already has the bacteria in it.

Dump it all together, water it down a little, and turn it over a few times for the next two or three weeks. Then cover the pile from winter rains and you are all set to use the finished product in the spring.

For those of you living where zoning laws and neighborhood associations don't permit the building of a dog house

The writer learned horticulture at his grandmother's knee, at Michigan State University, and as a weekend gardener.

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