

high nitrogen content, so when you throw them away, you're taking nitrogen from the grass. Leaving clippings on the ground won't replace fertilizer entirely, but it will allow you to eliminate one dose.

"People are conditioned to think that clippings are thatch, but they're not," he says. "Thatch can be the thick stems of grass, or sometimes even grass roots growing on the surface. Grass clippings are at least 80% water, and they decompose rapidly."

It's possible to compost without a commercial bin. The ideal size is 3 feet square by 3 feet high: 6 inches of brown and 6 inches of green organic matter, with a little soil in between. Water well. Turn to mix it up and place new layers of matter on top of the mix.

You can buy ready-made compost bins in various sizes, or you can make your own from wire mesh or wooden pallets. Never try to make compost in a solid trash can because air circulation is vital to the bacteria that break down the organic matter.

When the compost is ready to use, it will be black or dark brown and sweet smelling. Dig it into the soil when planting a garden, or add it to the hole when planting a shrub. Or spread thickly at the base of shrubs, trees, or perennials. Take care, however, to wait about two weeks after tilling the compost into your garden before you begin to plant new flowers or vegetables. The mixture needs time to mellow and work the soil.

Bill Meinert is both an advanced master gardener and master composter. Why would anybody want to be a master composter?

"Well, I've been composting since I was a pup," Meinert says. "I learned it from my father and I decided if I was going to compost, I should learn the biological basics — how to do it better and faster. Composting is both an art and a science."

Meinert mans a phone for the Oakland County Extension Service, where he fields questions on composting and general gardening. He is involved with a master gardeners' volunteer program dedicated to educating gardeners on such matters as composting and he teaches composting classes in several area communities.

Meinert says there are four reasons for the recent increased interest in composting: landfills are filling up; the expense of hauling trash from communities to landfills; environmental concerns; and Michigan Public Act # 264, which goes into effect in 1995. This act prohibits any yard waste at the curb that isn't going to be composted. Yard waste will no longer be accepted for landfills.

"You could just put everything in a pile, come back in two years, and you'd have compost," Meinert says. "But to speed things up, you have to turn the pile occasionally."

"That brown stuff is like gold — the faster I can churn it out, the happier I am."

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