KINGMAN IS GROWING! Column

COMPOST: GARDENER’S GOLD

By Vince Beatty and Barbara Conrath, Kingman Area Master Gardeners

One of the questions we hear from would be gardeners is how do I get a shovel into this ground? Many people who have come to Arizona from other areas in the country where top soil is rich in organic material have trouble dealing with our desert soil. Our answer is always the same. COMPOST!!!

What exactly is compost? It is the product of the composition of plant remains and other once-living materials by fungi and bacteria. A compost pile is like gold to a gardener, and every gardener should have one. It provides a wonderful organic soil to be used in the garden and around shrubs and trees. It costs very little, especially if you build your own bin; however, bins can be purchased from gardening catalogs, such as Gardener’s Supply (www.gardeners.com) or Plow and Hearth (www.plowandhearth.com/garden), or check with local hardware stores and nurseries.

If you choose to build your bin, 2 x 4’s and chicken wire are good materials. A one bin system is the simplest way to make compost. The bin should be a cubic yard, 3 x 3 x 3; if it is smaller or larger, it will be difficult to maintain a proper temperature. When planning to do composting, five things for you to consider are:

1. Ingredients – (a) carbon rich or “brown-dry”: leaves, hay, paper towels, corn stalks, sawdust. (b) nitrogen-rich or “green moist”: grass clippings, weeds without
seeds, vegetable and fruit peelings, green garden waste, manure (barnyard-type only – NO cat or dog or bird).

2. Water – very important to successful composting. Compost materials that are too dry will not decompose, and if too wet, they will have a bad odor. A well-managed pile should be similar to a squeezed sponge. A sprayer nozzle is good for regulating water flow.

3. Oxygen – turn or fluff your pile to maintain high levels of oxygen, especially in the center and sides of the pile where the most vigorous activity takes place. Occasionally take some of the bottom of the pile and put it on top.

4. Particle size – the smaller the particles, the faster the pile will decompose; cutting or chopping your kitchen waste into smaller pieces helps. The bigger the particles, the longer decomposition takes.

5. Bacteria and other microorganisms – these accomplish the actual breakdown of raw or organic materials. They already exist in soil and on the raw materials you place into your pile.

If you find that your pile doesn’t decompose, causes for this condition might include:

1. Low temperature: correct by adding greens, grass clippings, vegetable and fruit scraps, or manure.

2. Lack of nitrogen: add greens.

3. Poor aeration: be sure to turn your pile.

4. Too dry: add water and mix thoroughly.

If your pile smells bad, you might have:

1. Too much nitrogen (greens): add carbon browns and mix thoroughly.

2. Too much water: add carbon browns and remix pile.
3. Needs more oxygen: try using corn stalks or large woody stems or branches to create air pockets. These can be removed if they haven’t composted when your pile is ready.

If you follow these guidelines, in a relatively short time you should have a good quantity of compost to use in your garden, shrubs, and trees.

**Did you know?** Hauling garbage from Phantom Ranch at the bottom of the Grand Canyon is no easy chore. Pack mules carry the load for the historic guest ranch near the Colorado River. But employees at Phantom lighten the load by 25,000 pounds per year by composting kitchen waste and mule manure. The compost is then used for re-vegetation projects.

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