Talking Trash?
Doing your own composting can be easy

Composting – easy? They say all you have to do is layer garden trimmings with kitchen scraps, add water, mix and voila! “Black Gold” for your garden.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve tried to compost on and off for years and I never could figure out how you’re supposed to be continually adding ingredients to your compost pile while at the same time utilizing the finished product.

Last year a wise Master Gardener friend of mine turned me on to the idea of using garbage cans to make compost – that’s cans – plural. Since the idea of making compost is to use what is readily available, using old or inexpensive garbage cans made sense to me. There’s no need to buy one of those expensive tumblers or build a fancy bin. All you have to do is purchase three cheap plastic garbage cans with lids. Drill ½ inch holes, spaced 6 inches apart, all around the sides of the cans about halfway up from the bottom. You will also need to drill holes all around the bottoms of the cans.

Place all three cans in contact with the ground and within easy reach of a water source. The first can will be our work in progress. This is the can our will be continually adding your compost material to.
After that can is filled, let it “cook”, adding water and aerating it occasionally and begin working on the second can. The third can will contain yard trimmings you’ll collect. You’ll want to keep it readily available to add to the compost you are making you can customize the size cans to fit your needs.

People with small gardens and yards could use 10 gallon size cans, while those with large gardens and yards could put 55 gallon cans to use.

It’s recommended that you start your compost pile with some pre-made compost – either homemade or store bought. Start with a few inches of compost in the bottom of a garbage can, and then begin layering “brown” carbon-rich materials with “green” nitrogen-rich materials.

Brown materials are your yard trimmings: dead leaves, dry grass clippings, small woody branches, sawdust (have any friends that do woodworking?), shredded paper (how’s that for anti-identity theft!) and my personal favorite, bougainvillea leaves from neighbor’s bushes that blow into your yard. It’s recommended that you not use any parts of Oleander or other poisonous plants. Cut all woody trimmings into small pieces about ¾ inch size, or have them shredded so they can decompose faster. If you don’t have access to yard trimmings, there are huge piles of shredded plant material behind the Aquatic Center that the city has available for the taking.

Green materials include things such as green leaves, fresh grass clippings, fruit and vegetable scraps (including those old veggies in the bottom of the refrigerator bin that you forgot about), coffee
grounds – filter and all, tea bags and crushed eggshells. In fact, if you buy eggs in those paper cartons, break the carton up in small pieces and add that to your compost pile too. Do not put in any meat or dairy products or animal droppings. Again, make sure these pieces are small in size to aid in fact decomposition. For a finer compost texture, put green materials through a blender before adding them to your pile. A good rule of thumb is to use three parts brown materials to one part green. Don’t worry about the exact amount, the materials will decompose even if the ratio is not exact. Water should be added to keep the decomposing materials as moist as a well wrung-out sponge. The compost will start to heat up as the microorganisms do their work. (Microorganisms are the little buggers that turn all that “garbage” into compost).

Oxygen is used as the microorganism’s work, so your pile needs to be turned, or aerated to bring more oxygen into the pile. This can be done using a pitchfork or a long-handled claw. I keep an old ice cream bucket with a lid under my sink to put my kitchen scraps in. Once a week, or when the bucket is full, I dump it into the garbage can I’m currently working on. I then add some to the brown materials I’ve collected water if needed, mix it all together and put the lid back on. I repeat this layering process every week until the can is about one-half to two-thirds full. I then leave it to “cook” and start another can. Your compost should be ready to use in about five to eight weeks.
There are many benefits to using compost no matter how you use it. It reduces evaporation and weed growth as well as insulates the soil surface when applied as mulch. It increases the soil’s water-holding capacity, improves drainage and recycles nutrients when mixed in vegetable gardens and flowerbeds. If you want a finer compost mixture to add to potting mixes, finished compost can be sifted through a ½ inch mesh screen. The beauty of compost is that you can’t over apply it. Plants use what nutrients they need when they need it. I’ve recently heard that one third of the material put in our landfills could be composted. How’s that for an incentive to start.

COMPOSTING TIPS
Here are some trouble shooting tips in case you experience problems. If your pile has a rotten odor to it, it’s probably too wet and lacks oxygen. Simply turn the pile to aerate it and layer in more dry brown materials.
If you smell an ammonia odor, there’s probably an excess of nitrogen (green materials). Turn the pile and layer in more brown materials.
If the pile is not heating up (not decomposing) it’s probably too dry or there’s too much dry or woody (brown) material. Turn the pile and add water and more green material.
If the pile is attracting rodents or flies, there’s probably fruit or veggie scraps on the surface. Always bury kitchen scraps inside the pile by turning or sprinkling brown materials on top.
Kris Kidder is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. For more information, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by calling their Hot Line at 505-4105.

If you are new to the area and have questions, come to the library March 31st, 9:30am to 11:00am, Desert Gardening for newcomers workshop. It’s free and open to the public.

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