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Composting & Compost Teas

Compost is a necessary part of feeding your garden, which can be purchased or made yourself. The use of compost teas to create or feed the beneficial fungi can also help protect a plant's roots.

Compost Tea:

Place 2 lb of finished compost (such as worm castings) in a cloth bag, a pillowcase works well, that can be cinched closed. Soak the compost bag in 15.5 gallons of water for 12 hours, using a small water pump to mix and force air into the brew. Compost tea can be applied as a drench, by pouring on soil when watering, or as a foliar spray to all the plant parts above ground.

Composting:

Although there are lots of recipes for preparing compost piles, there are a few factors essential for success.

1. Collect materials – good raw material, such as garden wastes, grass clippings and kitchen scraps, manure, newspapers and sawdust. Avoid meat scraps and oils, which will attract foraging animals and slow decomposition.
2. Shred or chop large pieces – exposes more surface area to decomposing organisms and speeds up the process.
3. Layer the materials – goal is to create a ratio approximately 30 parts carbonaceous material (dry, yellow or brown, plant-based) to 1 part nitrogenous materials (wet, green, or animal-based). This is achieved with roughly equal volumes dry material such as leaves, straw, sawdust or paper, and wet materials, such as fresh grass clippings or manure.
4. Add a compost starter – While layering, include several shovelfuls of soil or finished compost, which serves to inoculate the pile with decomposer organisms naturally present in the soil. Keep the mix damp but not soggy, sprinkling layers with water as necessary. Cover pile to maintain the proper moisture level.
5. Turn the pile – Every few days, turn the pile with a garden fork, fluffing the materials as you go. If the pile seems dry, sprinkle with a little more water. Turning the pile works oxygen into the mix and hastens decomposition. As microbial activity increases, the temperature will rise. Use a soil or compost thermometer to monitor progress. Try to keep around 160°F, as higher temperatures can kill the organisms important to decomposition, while lower temperatures allow insect pests and disease organisms to survive the composting process.

You'll know your compost is finished when the temperature returns to normal and original ingredients are no longer recognizable. This can take as little as 2 weeks, if you turn the pile regularly and if adequate nitrogen is supplied.

For more info, see **The Organic Gardener's Handbook of Natural Insect and Disease Control**