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## **Now is the Time to Start a Compost Pile**

With fall cleanup right around the corner, now is a good time to start a compost pile with the scraps. Compost is organic material that is decayed by microorganisms, and adding it into your soil improves moisture retention, soil texture, and nutrient levels. You can build your own bin or use a pre-fab bin from a home improvement store or garden center, but all compost piles will need moisture and rotation to ensure even breakdown. Materials added to the pile are classified as either brown or green – brown materials are plant debris that has died, and green materials are fresh plant debris. Wood should not be added to the pile because of its slow decay time, and wood ashes should not be added to the compost unless your soil is very acidic, as wood ash raises the pH of your garden soil. Since most Kansas soils are already alkaline, this can lead to micronutrient deficiencies in your garden plants.

Green materials are needed in your compost pile to kickstart the metabolism of the microorganisms. The most common green material used is grass clippings, but research shows that mulching your yard with mowed grass clippings is more beneficial than adding them to a compost pile. As an alternative, you can add a small amount of commercial fertilizer or food scraps to the compost pile. To get a good number of microorganisms into the pile, a small amount of garden soil should also be added. Keep the pile moist by spraying it down once a week in hot weather. Compost piles should also get plenty of air – anaerobic decay leads to an unpleasant smell coming from the pile. Most pre-fab compost bins will have holes in the bin for air to enter, and all compost piles should get air once they are turned.

Most food scraps can be composted, and this is a great way to reduce food waste in the home. However, there are several additional things to keep in mind if composting food scraps. First, don't compost oils, grease, or meats. Meats are compostable, but in large quantities, they can attract unwanted attention from animals. Additionally, most food waste can begin to smell if it remains wet for too long, so you need to ensure that there is enough brown material to absorb

some of the excess water from the scraps you include in the pile. The ratio should be the same as if you were using green materials – 3 parts brown materials to 1-part food scraps.

Some municipalities will have a city compost pile that anyone can contribute scraps to, and take compost from. This is an excellent resource for the casual gardener, but exercise caution when applying it to treasured plants. Because anyone can contribute their brown and green materials, you won't know if any pesticides made their way into the pile. Anyone can spray an herbicide or insecticide, and while these chemicals break down after time and environmental exposure, they can still negatively impact your plants. Compost temperatures can reach 160o when properly turned, which assists in the breakdown of these chemicals, but if you value knowing exactly what has and hasn't been sprayed on the materials that will end up back in your garden soil, you are better off making your own compost pile.

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