

Let It Rot?

By Bonnie Rankin

The thought of Spring reminds me of that dank rich organic smell that occurs when the rains come and the snow melts. The leaves are decomposing, the soil is waking up, and spring is in the air. That wonderful smell is the smell of compost and the promise of warm weather to come. What *exactly* is compost? Compost is decayed matter such as manure, leaves and other organic substances used to improve the minerals and nutrients of the soil, usually a garden. Home composting is primarily vegetable based kitchen waste collected for placement in an outdoor compost container. Doing this reduces considerably the amount we throw away.

Let's think about our kitchen trash for a moment. Kitchen waste is usually wet, heavy and doesn't burn very well. Our trash in Chelmsford gets incinerated and it costs \$71/ Ton (cost will increase to \$73/Ton July 1st). In December 2007 we created 1,060 tons of Trash. Let me put that into perspective: a male African elephant weighs ~5 tons; we created 212 elephants worth of trash in December alone. We need to keep recycling, and that helps a great deal, but we need to think of new or rather old but valuable ways to reduce the amount of waste we put into the trash.

Growing up in Pennsylvania farm country, composting was a way of life long before it became the "green" thing to do. It was a cog in the machine of our daily existence, we just did it, and it was easy. Composting is a simple way we can reduce our waste in Chelmsford, better our soil, and make our frugal New England Forebears proud. If we all start to compost, we will be reducing the amount of waste we incinerate, saving the town money, and helping our planet. Just think how much money you will save at the garden center and how wonderful your plants will look.

I still compost, but I must admit I am a very lazy composter. I don't want to be bothered with a lot of fuss. I compost year round and I let Mother Nature do most of the work. One of my favorite books on Composting is Let It Rot by Stu Campbell. He says "To be a successful composter takes several things:

1. The realization that no matter what you do, no matter how many mistakes you make, you are still probably going to come up with reasonably good, usable compost.
2. A basic understanding of the life forms and processes that operate within a compost pile.
3. The willingness to experiment
4. A little effort
5. A little artistry"

So don't be intimidated by the all the information and products out there, find what works for you and do it. I still have nice compost without a lot of effort. Remember, composting is very forgiving.

Here are a few basics of composting to get you started:

1. You will need to have a container to collect your kitchen waste. (One with a lid works best. Large yogurt containers work great).
2. An area or container outside for your compost pile. Bins available through the office of Solid Waste and Recycling (978-250-5203) or you could make your own. There are many resources available at your library in the non-fiction section 631.875).
3. Collect your kitchen waste: coffee grounds, egg shells, potato peels, paper towels and etc. I would steer clear of putting meat or dairy into it. In the summer, put your leaves, grass clippings and yard waste in there too.
4. You will need a layer of soil to help the natural process begin. Manure works great too.
5. Make sure your bin or pile is exposed to rain, or you may need to water it now and then.
6. Flip it a few times a year (but if you're really lazy, like I am, you can skip this step with slower results)
7. It will be ready to spread on your gardens or lawn in the Spring and Fall.

Check out your local library for more information on how to get started or visit <http://www.mass.gov/dep/recycle/reduce/compos01.htm> . If you don't have a yard, don't worry there is information out there for you too. Try The Urban/Suburban Composter by Mark Cullen and Lorraine Johnson.