Starting a Compost Pile

It might not have felt like it last week but fall is coming with cooler temperatures forecasted for this coming week at least till the weekend. With fall comes quite a few different activities including cleaning the garden, raking up excess leaves and possibly preserving the last of your fall produce. With all of that plant material available, fall can be the perfect time to start a compost pile.

Compost is nature’s way of transforming organic material into a form usable by plants. Compost by definition is a mix of soil and rotted or decomposed organic material that has been transformed into material usable by plants by bacteria, fungi, microorganisms and air. Once it has decomposed this organic material can be incorporated into vegetable gardens, as a thin layer in lawns and used as mulch in flower beds. Compost is created using a combination of “brown” and “green” materials with beneficial decomposers, moisture and air (more on that later). In nature, composting is a slow process, however, with the proper planning composting can be a relatively quick process in the home garden.

When planning a compost bin the first step is to figure out where to put it. While compost piles need to stay damp to encourage faster decomposition, the bin should not be located in an area that stays consistently wet or holds water. Most people put their bins in an easily accessible, but out of the way location that is near their garden or flower beds. It is beneficial to have a water source nearby to keep the organic material damp but that is not a requirement. Composting can be made in a pit, using a bin or using a compost tumbler. How you compost will ultimately be up to your personal preferences and the amount of material you produce. Growing up we had a big compost pile that we threw organic material on and my dad would turn it with a skid steer periodically to facilitate the breaking down of material, it a backyard a compost pile should be in some type of enclosure to keep pets out of the material. One of the cheapest types of bins to make is using wooden pallets similar to the photo above however woven wire, cement bricks or other lumber works just as well. There are also commercial compost bins or tumblers available that work equally as well. Many people have multiple bins side by side and move the compost from one bin to another as it decomposes similar to the photo above.

Once you have figured out the location of your compost pile and built it it’s time to start composting. Compost should consist of “brown” and “green” materials. Brown materials provide the carbon needed in the pile. These materials are usually dry, hence why we call them brown, and provide air movement and food for the decomposers to eat on. Brown materials consist of: leaves, straw, saw dust, dryer lint, pine needles, etc. You should have at least twice as many browns as you have greens. Green materials provide the nitrogen needed to feed the decomposers. They help the decomposers grow and multiply. These materials include: grass clippings, kitchen waste (egg shells, peelings, scraps), flowers, coffee grounds, hair, manure and weeds (without seeds). There are several items that should never be added to the compost pile as they can lead to animals getting in the pile or disease and insect issues in the future. These items include: diseases or insect infested plants, pet waste, meat or dairy products, weeds with seeds in them, and poisonous plants.
There are two methods of composting, hot composting or cold composting. Hot composting is the faster method however it involves collecting the materials needed to create a pile all at once while cold composting takes longer but can be more user friendly by throwing materials into the pile as you have them and not layering the materials. To start a hot compost pile collect all the materials and then follow this pattern: Start the pile with a six to eight-inch layer of brown materials on the bottom of the pile, then add a two to three-inch layer of green materials and repeat until you have a pile approximately three feet by three feet. If green materials are in short supply you can add manure or a high nitrogen fertilizer sprinkled throughout the pile to add the necessary food for the decomposers. Water the pile in well and water it every week if it doesn’t rain. Watch the temperature of the pile, it should slowly rise to approximately 150-160 degrees and then slowly decrease. Once it starts to cool down turn the pile using a pitchfork which should cause it to heat up again. A hot compost pile should be ready in four to six months. Cold composting takes longer, up to a year, however you can add to the pile whenever you like. Try to keep the browns to greens at a ratio of 2 to 1 and keep the pile damp while turning it periodically. The compost is ready to use when there is no recognizable plant material and the organic matter is dark brown and crumbly.

Anthracnose on Tomatoes

This fungal disease is a frequent problem in the latter part of the growing season, specifically on ripening tomato fruit. Anthracnose results in a fruit rot that reduces the quality and yield of tomatoes. The symptoms of this disease first appear as small circular, slightly sunken lesions on the surface of ripening fruit. The spots quickly enlarge becoming bruise like depressions that develop a water-soaked appearance beneath the surface of the skin. Soon after black concentric rings consisting of numerous small fruiting structures form in the center of the lesions. This disease is common during warm, humid weather after a rain or over head watering where the spores splash onto the fruit from the ground. Disease development is favored by temperatures over 80 degrees. There are several cultural practices that can help reduce the incidence of anthracnose. Try to mulch around your tomatoes to prevent the splashing of spores from the soil. You should also provide support for your tomatoes either with cages, stakes or trellises to increase air movement and decrease the likelihood of favorable environmental conditions for infection. Use soaker hoses or drip irrigation to prevent the splashing of the spores onto the fruit from overhead watering (there is only so much we can do with rain.) Remove any infected fruit as soon as you notice the damage. If you have had issues with anthracnose in the past you can apply preventative sprays, once the fruits are infected it can’t be saved. Spray options include the active ingredients Bacillus subtilis, chlorothalonil, copper fungicides, or maneb. Be sure to read the label to check the post-harvest interval (how long after you spray before you can harvest the fruit) and make sure it is labeled for anthracnose and the vegetable you are spraying.

Plant of the Week- Seven-Son Flower

This week we are going to highlight an underutilized plant in the Seven-Son Flower or Heptacodium minicoides. Seven-Son flower is a member of the Caprifoliaceae and can be a large multi-stem shrub or a small tree depending on how it is pruned. This tree can grow 10 to 20 feet tall and approximately half as wide as a fountain-like shrub or single trunk tree. It offers year-round interest in the landscape with several unique features. Buds appear in early summer however they don’t open till September with beautiful white blooms that are fragrant and nectar rich which attract a variety of pollinators. After the flowers fade the sepals turn cherry red to rose purple seed pods that persist through the fall and winter. After the leaves fall in autumn the beautiful exfoliating bark is revealed and offers winter interest through the dreary season. Seven-son flower is a moderately fast grower that thrives in a range of soils from poor to good and tolerates some shade. It does prefer to stay slightly damp however it will tolerate dry conditions. Use this as a focal point in your landscape or as a small shade tree in your yard.
Insect of the Week - Lace Bugs
This week we are highlighting the Lace Bug. Lace bugs are sap feeding insects that are commonly found on shade trees in the area. Their growth and development occurs throughout the summer however, the damage typically isn’t noticed till August when their numbers are at the highest. Both the adults and nymphs feed on the undersides of leaves causing the characteristic copper, scorched or bleached discoloration on the leaf surface. Lace bug adults have attractive wings which have an intricate patter of veins that resemble lace (hence the common name). The wings are flat on top and extend out over the sides of the body. Adults are approximately 3/8-inch long. Nymphs are black, spiny and pointed at both ends. Damage caused by lace bugs varies greatly from one year to another, probably in response to variations in weather conditions. Most of the time trees can handle the damage caused by lace bugs however, in years with high numbers the damage can cause premature leaf drop and several years of severe feedings can stress the tree. Usually by the time you notice the damage caused by this insect it’s too late to spray and as the damage has already been done. In some cases, spray could be warranted when lace bugs dropping out of the tree onto patios create a nuisance situation. There are several chemicals that can be used to treat for lace bugs including insecticidal soap, horticultural oil, carbaryl, bifenthrin, permethrin or pyrethroids. The last four chemicals are broad spectrum and will kill lace bugs but will also kill natural predators so use with caution. Systemic insecticides are also effective but need to be applied early in the year and should be used with caution.

Video of the Week: Dividing Perennial Flowers
Some perennials may spread and take up too much space. Other perennials such as ornamental grass may develop a hole in the middle. This segment demonstrates the process involved in dividing perennials. Doing this every few years will help to rejuvenate them, and you can share the extra plants with friends. Watch the video here: https://kansashealthyyards.org/all-videos/video/dividing-perennial-flowers

Kim Chi-Inspired Cucumber Salad
Ingredients
- 1 English cucumber
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 Tablespoon grated ginger
- 1 teaspoon Korean chili powder (Gochugara)
- 1 Tablespoon sesame seeds

DIRECTIONS
1. Cut the cucumber in half lengthwise and scoop out the seeds using a spoon.
2. Slice the cucumber into thin slices and place in a colander in the sink or over a bowl.
3. Toss the cucumber with the salt and set aside to drain for 2 hours.
4. Place the cucumbers in a bowl and combine with remaining ingredients.
5. Refrigerate until chilled.
(Source: https://medinsteadofmeds.com/kim-chi-inspired-cucumber-salad/)
Reminders-
- Avoid fertilizing perennials now so they harden off before the first frost
- Divide Peonies
- Fertilize strawberry plants
- Turn compost pile and add water if dry

Upcoming Events

- **September 6th at Noon - Seed Saving from your Garden**
  Seed saving is a fun way to enjoy gardening without breaking the bank. Most plants produce seeds that can be saved from one year to the next, however, not all seeds are equally suited for saving. Jesse Gilmore, Wildcat Extension District Horticulture Extension Agent, will discuss the merits of seed saving, the different types of flowers and seeds, and which plants are most suited to seed saving. This class is offered online via Zoom. For more information on the Garden Hour series or to register visit here: [https://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/consumer-horticulture/garden-hour/](https://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/consumer-horticulture/garden-hour/)

- **September 14th at 6 pm - Winter Care of Houseplants - Bradford Memorial Library in El Dorado**
  Over 66% of U.S. households have at least one houseplant, but often the terms used to describe their care can be confusing. Decode common houseplant terms related to light, water, and other plant needs. Learn about some unique houseplants and the best practices to keep them thriving. Join us at the Bradford Memorial Library (611 S. Washington St. El Dorado, KS) at 6 pm for this free webinar. There will be free cuttings of some houseplants given away!

- **October 4th at Noon - Putting your Garden to Bed: Winter Garden Prep**
  The growing season is nearly over, but your garden work may not be done just yet. Join Anthony Reardon, West Plains District Horticulture Extension Agent, as you learn about all of the various gardening tasks that can help your landscape throughout the winter and prepare your garden for the growing season to come. This class is offered online via Zoom. For more information on the Garden Hour series or to register visit here: [https://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/consumer-horticulture/garden-hour/](https://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/consumer-horticulture/garden-hour/)

- **October 15th from Noon to 4 pm - Houseplant and Perennial Plant Swap**
  Have your houseplants grown like crazy this year and need a trim or did you divide some perennials and have extras? Bring your plants to the Plant Swap hosted by the Butler County Master Gardeners. The rules are simple: 1) Bring at least one plant, cutting or seeds to trade or sell, 2) All swaps must be labeled with plant name, 3) All plants must be pest and disease free. This event is free to attend, just bring your favorite plants to share with plant lovers in your community!!! Register so we can have enough tables: [https://forms.gle/ddB6As2f53Cj9PZa9](https://forms.gle/ddB6As2f53Cj9PZa9)