How to Begin Composting

By Susan Camp

In last week's "Gardening Corner," I wrote about some of the benefits of home composting: the creation of healthy organic material that will enrich the soil in your garden without the expense of lab-created inorganic fertilizers; decreased pollution from chemical runoff into our waterways; and fewer trips to the convenience center with smaller loads of trash. Ultimately, you will produce healthier homegrown fruits and vegetables and more beautiful flowers and shrubs.

Now that you are ready to begin composting, you still have some homework to do before you can start throwing stuff on a pile in your backyard. First, check county ordinances and community or homeowners' association regulations. You shouldn't have a problem in rural areas of Gloucester, but let neighbors know that you plan to install a compost bin or pile. They will want to know that your latest garden project won't smell or attract flies or unwanted pests of the furry kind. If you avoid adding animal products like meat scraps and fats, the critters won't be interested. You will need to place your compost bin in a sunny spot, but not next to your next-door neighbor's fence.

The second step is to decide what type of composting unit to install. Commercial bins and barrels are available, but they are expensive. These bins require little attention, but produce only small amounts of compost. They would provide adequate compost for a few small garden beds or borders. Most bins are constructed of plastic or metal and have lids that seal tightly to prevent rodents from entering. Some have rotating canisters so you can mix the materials on a regular basis to help them break down more quickly.

Many homeowners build compost bins out of wood and chicken wire. You can find instructions and YouTube videos online for various styles with one to three compartments. If you have space, the three-compartment style allows you to move the composting material from bin to bin as it decomposes. The third bin will contain the finished product. It is a good idea to place a layer of rat wire underneath the bins to help keep critters out. Worms are welcome.

The multiple bin process is a type of hot composting, a complex procedure that requires attention every few days, as you will need to turn and transfer material from one bin to the next as it heats up to 110 to 160° F, then starts to cool. Depending on the frequency of turning, you will have compost in four weeks to three months. You can jumpstart the heating process in the spring with the addition of chicken manure and commercial enzyme additives.

The question of whether to use pressure-treated vs. untreated wood to build a compost bin often arises. The treatment of wood with copper, chromium, and arsenic (CCA) was banned in the U.S. in 2003 because of the risk of arsenic leaching into surrounding soil. Wood is now treated with copper oxide and quaternary ammonium (ACQ) with less risk to humans and animals, although

less toxic copper may leach. You can use untreated wood, but it will rot more quickly. If you choose to build with pallets, there may be some risk of leaching if the pallets are very old.

If you aren't in a rush to produce compost, cold or slow composting might fulfill your needs. With this method, you simply pile material on the ground or in a wire bin. Keep the material moist and cover the pile with a tarp or black plastic. In a few months to two years, you will have usable compost.

Find more information on composting in Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publications 452-231 "Compost: What Is It and What's It to You?"; 426-704 "Using Compost in Your Landscape"; and 426-703P "Making Compost from Yard Waste."

You can read other helpful articles in the Cornell Waste Management Institute publication "Home Composting," including "Composting at Home—the Green and Brown Alternative," and "Preventing Animal Nuisances in Small Scale Composting."