



Fact sheet

Using Leaf Compost

*Roy L. Flannery, Specialist in Soils, Emeritus and
Franklin Flower, Specialist in Environmental Science, Emeritus*

Composting involves primarily the microbial decomposition of organic matter. Compost - the end product - is a dark, friable, partially decomposed substance similar to natural organic matter found in the soil. The organic matter content of soils is very important. It influences the physical condition, water-holding capacity, and temperature of the soil, and especially the soil bacterial processes which affect the availability of mineral salts to plants.

Why Compost Leaves

If newly fallen leaves are added directly to the soil without first being composted, the microbes that decompose the leaves compete with growing plants for soil nitrogen. The temporary nitrogen shortage caused by the microbes can reduce plant growth. To reduce or eliminate this competition for nitrogen, composting of the leaves is recommended prior to incorporating them into soils.

Need for Organic Matter

Most New Jersey soils need an increase of 1/2 to 1% in organic matter. Sandy soils, such as loamy sands and sands, and soils with very high clay content are improved the most by an increase in organic matter content.

Benefits of Adding Leaf Compost to Soil

- Among the benefits derived from adding leaf compost to New Jersey soils are:
- Drought damage to plants is reduced because of an increased water-holding capacity of the soils.
- Soil tilth is improved making the soils easier to cultivate.

- Very small amounts of the 16 essential elements needed for plant growth are supplied.
- Adverse effects of excessive alkalinity, acidity, or over-fertilization are reduced by the added buffering of the soil.
- The cation exchange capacity of soils is increased, enabling the soils to hold more plant nutrients for longer periods.
- Decomposition of the organic matter produces organic acids which combine with iron and aluminum ions, thereby reducing their potential toxicity to plants. This also makes more phosphorus available for plants because free iron and aluminum can tie up the phosphates.
- The added organic matter provides a food source for desirable soil micro-organisms.
- When incorporated into the soil, or used in a thin mulch 1/16- to 1/8-inch thick, compost helps seeds to germinate.

Overall, compost improves the physical, chemical, and biological properties of soils. Leaf compost, however, is not normally considered a fertilizer as it is too low in nutrient content. It serves primarily as an organic amendment and a soil conditioner. The nitrogen content of composted leaves on a dry basis is about 1/2 to 1% by weight. For other materials commonly added to backyard leaf compost piles, the nitrogen content is: blood meal 10-14%; grass clippings 2-4%; coffee grounds 1 1/2-2%; eggshells 1-2%; horse manure 1-5%; cow manure 1-1 1/2%; poultry manure 3-5%; ammonium sulfate 20 1/2%; urea 45%; bone meal 1 1/2-4%; and cotton seed meal 6-7%.

When Compost is Ready to Use

When compost is ready to use (6 to 18 months after starting) its temperature will generally have decreased to slightly above air temperature. Finished compost will usually be drier than leaves during composting. The material also will be crumbly in texture. Before using compost, "screening" may be necessary to remove the larger partially decomposed materials. These materials will sometimes be present in composting piles because not all items decompose at the same rate. The undecomposed organic matter clumps may be broken up and added to another active compost pile for additional decomposition.

Adding Leaf Compost to the Soil

A good rate of organic matter to work into the top 6 1/2 to 7 inches of most New Jersey cultivated soils is 0.5 to 1.0% organic matter by weight. This is equivalent to adding 900 to 1,800 wet pounds (25 to 50 bushels) of leaf compost per 1,000 square feet of area. To accomplish this, spread a 3/8- to 3/4-inch depth of leaf compost uniformly over the soil surface and mix into the top 6 to 8 inches of soil.

Little or no nitrogen will be released from compost for plant use during the season immediately following incorporation into the soil. It is generally necessary to add nitrogen to soils containing compost to prevent the compost from "robbing" the soil of nitrogen and creating deficiency problems in plants grown in the soil. Adding 1 to 1 1/2 lbs. of 10% nitrogen fertilizer to each 100 lbs. (about 3 bushels) of leaf compost is recommended.

The preceding recommendations supply only the needs of the leaf compost. Most plants require an additional 1 to 3 lbs. of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet for normal feeding. This nitrogen should be applied to the soil in addition to that applied in the leaf compost.

Using Leaf Compost as a Mulch

Leaf compost can also be used as an organic mulch on the surface of soil in place of peatmoss, straw, etc. Organic mulches are valuable because they:

- Reduce rainfall runoff, thereby making more water available for plant growth.

- Decrease water evaporation losses from the soil.
- Keep the soils cooler in hot weather and warmer in cold weather.
- Reduce alternate freezing and thawing of soils which can injure the fibrous roots of plants.
- Help to prevent soil erosion by wind or water.
- Keep soils friable, therefore easier to cultivate.
- Increase biological activity of earthworms and other soil organisms.
- Prevent soil spattering on leaves, flowers, or fruits such as strawberries.
- Reduce soil compaction from rain and irrigation water.
- Help to control weeds.
- Present a pleasing appearance.

Recommended thicknesses of mulch layers: 2-3 inches for deciduous shrubs and trees, vegetables, and rosebeds; 3 inches for flower beds; and 3-4 inches for shallow-rooted, acid-loving plants.

Other Uses for Leaf Compost

Leaf compost may also be used in potting soil. However, no more than 25 to 30% of the potting soil should be leaf compost. Frequently leaf compost will continue to decompose. If more than 25 to 30% of the potting soil is leaf compost, there will be a significant volume reduction of the potting soil after 1 year.

Composting generally destroys most weed seeds contained in the compost material; however, not all of them will be destroyed. Some are heat resistant, and others will not be fully exposed to the high temperatures. If a completely pasteurized leaf compost is desired for potting soil, it will be necessary to heat it in an oven until the temperature of the center of the mass reaches 180°F and is maintained for 30 minutes.

