CITY OF AMES IOWA
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City Attorney's Office

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October 7, 2009

The Honorable Ann Campbell, Mayor,
and Members of the City Council
of the City of Ames, Iowa

Re: Sec. 10.8 of the Ames City Code and Proposed Composting Ordinance

Dear Mayor Campbell and Council Members:

I am writing this letter regarding proposed changes to section 10.8 of the Ames City Code and the possible addition of a new ordinance regarding composting. This issue was brought to Council recently and was referred to Kevin Anderson, the City Sanitarian. Specifically, concerns were raised regarding the fact that section 10.8 currently only allows for composting of yard waste and does not allow for composting of kitchen scraps of any kind.

Additional members of city staff were consulted regarding this issue and a consensus was reached that certain kitchen scraps should be allowed in compost piles, while others should be strictly prohibited. Materials from ISU extension were provided and it was agreed that any changes to the City's ordinances should comply with the recommendations contained in those materials. Those materials are attached to this letter for your review.

With these issues in mind, the City Attorney's Office recommends the following action:

1. Direct the City Attorney to draft an ordinance which removes subsection (3)(b) from section 10.8 of the Ames Municipal Code and creates a new section in chapter 10 that deals with composting. This new section should conform to the ISU extension materials and allow for composting of fruit and vegetable trimmings, coffee grounds and eggshells, in addition to yard waste. Additionally the new section should specifically state that animal meat, bone and fat are prohibited from composting as well as feces and diseased plant material.

2. Council may also direct the City Attorney to include additional language in the new composting section that provides setback requirements, size restrictions, container requirements and pest abatement if Council believes that the expanded composting provisions will result in citizen complaints.

While discussing this solution with other departments, there were some concerns raised regarding potential complaints about expanding residential composting. Specifically, there were concerns regarding the proximity of a compost pile to a property boundary and possible odors that may emanate from it as well as a concern regarding rodents or pests that may be attracted to the pile. To resolve these issues, other cities have enacted much more comprehensive composting

ordinances which describe set back requirements from property boundaries as well as water sources. These other municipalities have also included container requirements for composting, language concerning maximum size allowances for compost piles, and specific language that deals with pests and rodents.

The following are additional provisions that could be added to the new section in chapter 10 that deals with composting within the City of Ames. These additional provisions are taken directly from comprehensive composting ordinances from White Bear, Minnesota and Chicago, Illinois.

> Location. No compost site may be closer than five (5) feet from any rear or side property line and shall not be located in any front yard, or closer than twenty-five (25) feet from any residential dwelling except the dwelling occupied by the landowner. Composting areas shall also be located and designed so that seepage from the compost will not run off into public or private streets, storm sewers, drainage ditches, water retention basins, streams or lakes.
>
> Size. No compost pile may exceed 25 square feet in area or exceed 4 feet in height.
>
> Composting Containment Structure. All compost sites must be totally contained within a structure which may be constructed of wood, wire mesh or a combination of wood and wire or commercially fabricated compost bins designed to contain composting materials.
>
> Rodent and Pest Control. The presence of insects, rodents, birds and other vectors or pests shall be controlled through specific measures. These specific measures may include grinding the ingredients, providing screens or netting or conducting the composting operation in-vessel.

Additional direction from Council is necessary if the ordinance should be drafted to accomplish more than the current goal of including certain limited kitchen scraps to compost piles. The provisions contained above are examples of language that may be added to a new ordinance regarding composting within the City of Ames. The City Attorney's Office does not have any specific recommendations regarding these additional provisions. These are simply being offered as a solution to concerns raised by City staff.

Sincerely,

Kristine Stone

Kristine Stone
Assistant City Attorney

Att: ISU extension brochure

How long does it take to reach a finished product?

Generally, a compost pile that contains a good mixture of finely chopped materials, is turned regularly and kept moist, will be ready in about 2 to 4 months. A compost pile composed of non-shredded materials that is left unattended may take a year or longer to decompose. Piles prepared in late fall will not be very well decomposed by spring. When the compost is finished, the pile will be about half its original size and have a pleasant, earthy smell.

Of what value or use is the finished compost product?

Compost is used as an organic amendment to improve the physical, chemical and biological properties of soils. For example, adding compost to garden soil will increase the moisture holding capacity of sandy soils and improve the drainage and aeration of heavy clay soils. Over time, yearly additions of compost will create desirable soil structure making the soil easier to work.

Will compost eliminate the need for commercial fertilizers in my garden?

To a limited extent, compost is a source of nutrients. However, nutrient release from compost is slow and the nutrient content is often too low to supply all the nutrients necessary for plant growth. Compost should not be considered a substitute for fertilizer, but rather a supplement. Compost increases the ability of the soil to hold and release essential plant nutrients, especially in sandy soils. This may reduce the amount of fertilizers needed.

For more information

Horticultural information is available from your local Iowa State University Extension office and from these Web sites.

ISU Extension Distribution Center—
www.extension.iastate.edu/store

ISU Horticulture—
www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu

Reiman Gardens—
www.reimangardens.iastate.edu

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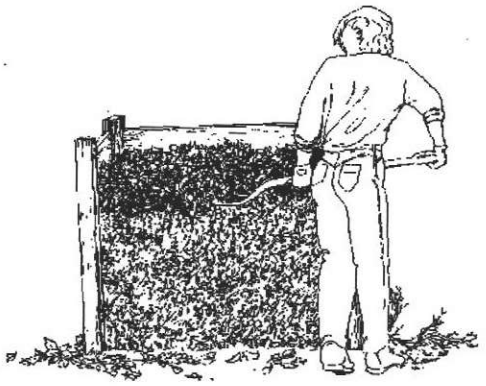
File: Hort and LA 1

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jack M. Payne, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

RG 206 Revised December 2007

REIMAN GARDENS
IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Questions About Composting



IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
University Extension

The Iowa Waste Reduction and Recycling Act of 1989 prohibited the disposal of yard wastes in sanitary landfills. This encouraged many gardeners and homeowners to try composting their leaves, grass clippings, and garden refuse. Although the process of composting is not difficult, some gardeners simply created "organic trash heaps" and became discouraged because the plant material in their pile did not readily decompose.

Below are a few of the commonly asked questions about composting.

What kinds of materials can be composted?

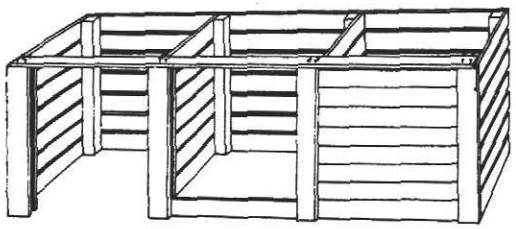
Yard and garden residues and other organic materials are suitable for composting. This includes leaves, grass clippings, straw and hay, sawdust, and finely chopped or shredded tree and shrub prunings.

Can kitchen scraps be added to a compost pile?

Certain kitchen scraps can be added to the compost pile, such as fruit and vegetable trimmings (including rhubarb leaves), coffee grounds and eggshells. Bury them in the pile to prevent odors and flies. Do not add meat scraps, bones, grease, whole eggs, or dairy products to the compost pile because they decompose slowly, cause odors, and can attract rodents.

What other things shouldn't be added to a compost pile?

Because of the possibility of the transmission of certain diseases, human, dog, and cat feces should not be placed in compost piles. Also, diseased plant material or weeds that have gone to seed may be undesirable in the compost pile. If the temperature in the pile does not reach 150° to 160°F, neither the weed seeds nor the disease organisms will be destroyed. If diseased plant materials are composted, the end product may be better used in another area of the yard rather than in the garden where they were generated.



For more information and instructions for building a stationary 3-bin compost turning unit, see "Composting Yard Waste" (PM 683).

What is the optimum size for a compost pile?

The best size for an enclosed compost pile is between a 3' x 3' x 3' pile and a 5' x 5' x 5' pile. If any smaller, it will dry out too fast; any larger and there will be poor air movement and it will be difficult to turn the pile.

Can wood ashes from the fireplace be used in the compost pile?

Wood ashes act as a lime source and should only be added in small amounts (no more than 1 cup per bushel of compost).

If my lawn has been treated with herbicides, can I still use the clippings in my compost pile?

Composting is an accelerated decomposition process that biodegrades many compounds faster than soil degradation. The faster degradation in an active compost pile is due to the more favorable conditions for decomposition of organic products including herbicides. If yard waste has been composted at least one year, pesticide residues should not be a problem when the compost is used.

Can I compost my newspapers?

Yes. Most newspapers today use soybean-based or other non-toxic inks. To promote decomposition, shred newspapers and mix with other materials.

Why doesn't a pile of leaves readily decompose?

It is best to have a mixture of organic materials together in the compost pile. Dry leaves are a high-carbon organic material. The microbes that do the decomposing require a certain amount of nitrogen for their own metabolism and growth. Without a nitrogen source, the decomposition will be slow. Grass clippings are high in nitrogen. When mixed together, the grass clippings will enhance the decomposition of the leaves.

Are commercially available inoculants or activators needed to have rapid decomposition in a compost pile?

Inoculants are dormant microorganisms. They are rarely needed, since soil, leaves, kitchen scraps, and finished compost already contain ample bacteria that readily work on their own. The only "activator" that may be needed is a nitrogen source since nitrogen is usually the limiting nutrient. Nitrogen accelerates the decomposition process if the materials to be composted are high in carbon, such as dried leaves.

How can I avoid problems with unpleasant odors from the compost pile?

Odors may arise from the addition of excessive amounts of wet plant materials such as fruits or grass clippings, from overwatering the pile, or by not periodically turning an actively decomposing pile. A properly prepared and adequately turned compost pile will generate little, if any, objectionable odor. Good aeration, provided by regularly turning over the materials in the pile, is essential for good, rapid decomposition. Also, keeping the compost damp but not waterlogged will go a long way toward preventing unpleasant odors. Adding lime does not necessarily reduce odors and may result in the loss of nitrogen from the pile.