Lead Education and Assistance Program
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Autumn Composting Can Reduce Risks of Lead

Now is a perfect time to begin gathering materials for composting, as the cool weather turns your outdoor foliage brown and leaves start filling your yard!

Composting doesn't have to be a difficult process. If you have never done it before, then what better time to jump-start your plants, lawn and especially your vegetable garden with nutritious supplements for next year.

Gardening is a great way to improve your health. It can encourage you and your family to eat more fruits and vegetables and provides an opportunity for more physical activity.

However, in East Helena, where lead from the ASARCO smelter has contaminated the soil over many decades, composting presents special challenges.

By following these easy tips, you can make sure the produce you grow is healthy and safe to eat:

- Add organic materials like compost, manure, leaves, and grass clippings to your garden to bind lead and make it less available to contaminate plants.
- Add mulch to the garden to reduce dust and help prevent soil from splashing onto plants during irrigation or rainstorms.
- Build raised beds using safe materials (don’t use treated lumber, railroad ties, or old painted wood), laying down a barrier of landscaping fabric, and filling the bed with clean soil to reduce exposure to lead in the soil.
- Grow crops in containers filled with clean soil as an alternative to reduce lead exposure.
- Locate your garden as far as possible from busy streets, highways, and old buildings. Traffic can spread lead-contaminated dust, and old buildings may shed lead paint.

The key to successful composting is maintaining a balance between materials that are primarily made up of carbon or nitrogen. A healthy compost pile should have about two-thirds carbon-rich (brown) materials and one-third nitrogen-rich (green) materials.

Carbon (brown) materials make up most of your compost pile. They are abundant in autumn and less available the rest of the year, but you can save them to add the following summer. They provide aeration to speed up the composting process, eliminate foul odors and help produce a finished compost that is light and fluffy. Carbon (brown) materials include such things as:

- Dry leaves
- Vines
- Shrub prunings
- Straw
- Sawdust
- Paper and cardboard

Nitrogen-rich (green) materials provide bodybuilding proteins for the microorganisms at work in the compost and are usually available in some form all year long.

Kitchen scraps are a great source of nitrogen and an excellent addition to your compost pile. They include such things as:

- Coffee grounds
- Tea
- Condiments and sauces
- Corncobs
- Cut flowers
- Eggshells
- Fruit rinds and cores
- Stale or moldy bread and grain products
- Vegetables (raw or cooked)

Additional green materials include:

- Grass clippings
- Leafy plant trimmings, spent flowers, herbs, and vegetables
- Livestock manure

Not everything can or should be composted. Here is a list of some things you should not compost and the reason why:

- Coal or charcoal ash might contain substances harmful to plants.
- Dairy products (like butter, milk, sour cream, yogurt and eggs) create odor problems and attract pests such as rodents and flies.
- Plants infected with disease or insects might survive to infect other plants.
- Fats, grease, lard, or oils create odor problems and attract pests.
- Meat or fish bones and scraps create odor problems and attract pests.
- Pet wastes (like dog or cat feces and soiled cat litter) might contain parasites, bacteria, germs, pathogens, and viruses harmful to humans.
- Yard trimmings treated with chemical pesticides might kill beneficial composting organisms.

If you would like to learn more about composting, check out an excellent website at:

http://msuextension.org/stillwater/fcsmontguides/HomeComposting.pdf