

An Introduction to Compost

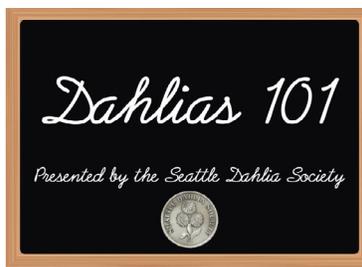
In an established garden, on an annual basis we need to add to our garden soil that wonderful thing called *humus*. Humus is an old English Gardening Term for well-rotted compost, which is made from all of the biodegradable things such as old plants, potato and apple peels, lettuce, cabbage, cauliflower leaves, coffee grounds, citrus peels etc., and many of the things that we tend to throw away in the garbage. We should in fact be putting these things back into the garden year after year.

Humus is essential to the soil. It is dark-brown crumbly organic material, consisting of plant remains. Throughout their various stages of decay, these biodegradable things ensure the continued survival of bacteria in the soil. This is necessary to keep the soil fertile. Humus helps retain moisture, keeps the soil well aerated and is an excellent source of plant nutrients. On cultivated ground, humus breaks down more quickly than it would if left alone. That is why it is very important to replenish soil with well-rotted manure, compost, leaf mold or other forms of humus whenever possible. In all the great gardens of the world, including gardens that have been established for thousands of years, compost is added to the soil on a yearly basis.

Compost Bins

Compost bins can be built out of lumber, usually 2 X 4s, wire mesh or open wire fencing and just about any other materials that are available. Warehouse dunnage racks can be used for the sides & backs. Be sure that there is adequate air circulation within the bin. Many area agencies sell, offer at discount or give to gardeners plastic compost makers.





Starting your "pile"

To begin your compost pile mix together potato peels, cabbage leaves, coffee grounds, and other organic materials. If you are using grass clippings, they must be mixed in with the organic materials or dirt; this will prevent the clippings from molding together and forming clumps of grass, which are difficult to break down. After adding the first layer of organic materials, about four to six inches high, sprinkle a high nitrogen fertilizer over the pile, (high first number fertilizer). Ammonium sulfate is also a very good choice; it breaks organic materials down very quickly.

If manures are available, they are excellent for heating up the pile and encouraging the breakdown of the organic materials. Chicken manure is an excellent source of nitrogen. Blood meal is also very high in nitrogen. Compost additives are also available at many garden stores; these also aid in the breakdown of the pile. After adding the nitrogen, in whatever form you choose, cover with two inches of garden soil.

Continue to build the compost in six-inch layers. The compost should be turned every couple of months or so. This will encourage further breakdown. Another method to get air into the pile is to poke bamboo canes or sticks into the pile. Four or six canes poked all the way to the bottom of the pile will allow good air circulation into the pile and encourage the bacteria to activate and rot. Some cover their compost with (black) plastic sheeting to encourage heat and encourage rotting of the organic materials.

Soil Composition

The best soil type for dahlias is loam - a mixture of sand, clay, silt and organic material. Good results can be achieved in other soil types, but the richer the soil is in organic material (such as compost) the better the blooms from your dahlia plants.

Soil composition can be determined using a simple test. Get an eight to ten inch tall clear glass container (like a fruit jar) and six inches of soil from your garden, taken at root depth (six to eight inches deep). Dump this soil into a large container, add water and agitate it until it is thoroughly wet. Keep it agitated and pour the mixture into the glass container. Let the mixture settle. The heavier material, such as sand will settle to the bottom followed by the light material on top. An ideal soil composition will consist of three inches of sand and other coarse particles, followed by one and three-quarter inches of loam, clay or a mixture of the two. The third layer, about one-quarter inch thick, will be organic material. The last inch of the glass container should be water. "Soil Composition" courtesy of Puget Sound Dahlia Association. *Dahlias a Monthly Guide*

