

Forsyth Field Notes

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Forsyth County Cooperative Extension News

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Three ways to handle yard waste when your trash service won't

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As our community experiences the at-home togetherness of telework, online school, and sheltering in place, warming temperatures tempt us outside to enjoy the beauty that spring in Georgia offers. This spring burst of plant growth also brings the necessity of yard work.

Weeding, mowing, and pruning produce loads of yard waste that many people are accustomed to leaving curbside for disposal by their trash service. In recent weeks, however, several trash collection services have notified customers that they aren't picking up certain types of trash during the COVID-19 crisis, including yard waste.

Fortunately, we can reduce, reuse, and recycle yard waste at home in ways that are safe and beneficial to our landscapes.

Composting is my go-to for handling dead leaves, weeds, and trimmings from landscape plants, as well as kitchen food scraps. In the compost pile, billions of beneficial microbes digest plant-based waste, literally reducing the size of the pile. Once the waste is composted, it can be recycled back into our yard and garden beds for reuse as a soil amendment. Compost returns needed organic matter to soil and improves its structure, making it a better growing environment for plants.



Spring yard work can get a compost pile full and processing quickly. Photo by H.N. Kolich

To start a compost pile, pick a shady spot in the backyard and start dumping non-woody yard waste there. Smaller pieces break down faster than large stuff does, so I use my pruning tool to chop up long stems and small branches as I add them to the pile. The soil microbes need moisture and air to do their work. Moisten the pile each time you add a layer of yard waste and use a pitchfork to mix materials and open pockets for air.



When the pile measures between 3-6 cubic feet in size, stop adding new material. Stir the pile every 2-3 weeks as it “cooks,” and add water as needed to keep it evenly moist.

When all the material looks the same and you can’t tell an oak leaf from an apple core, the compost is ready to use. Work several inches into garden beds or broadcast it as a topdressing over lawn areas. Compost helps lighten up heavy clay and improves drainage, while the microbes work to increase soil fertility.

Grass-cycling is an effortless way to return organic matter to soil and nurture the lawn. Simply remove the bag from your mower and leave grass clippings where they fall. Because they’re mostly water, grass clippings melt into the soil within a day or two, where they replenish the organic matter that is often missing from Georgia soil.

Chipper-shredders are an option for reducing brush and branches. While the cost to rent or buy chipper-shredder equipment may seem prohibitive, consider what you’ll save in herbicide and labor costs by using home-made mulch to control weeds around your landscape. Mulch also returns organic matter and nutrients to the soil as it decomposes.

I’ve seen several neighbors burning yard waste recently, but that is a last-choice option for several reasons. Burning yard waste poses safety issues, including introducing pollution into the air. Protecting air quality is the primary reason that Georgia imposes outdoor burning bans in 54 counties from May 1 through September 30 each year. Some counties have already prohibited outdoor burning to reduce the burden on emergency responders as we all practice

social distancing. In addition, burned yard waste does little to improve soil.

Rather than an inconvenience, let’s try to see managing yard waste at home as a silver lining to the dark cloud of the COVID-19 pandemic. It allows us to both improve our soil and extend the life of our landfill.

Connect with Food Gardening

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Springtime seems to wake up a planting gene in many of us. A summer food garden is a fun and satisfying family project. Growing food from seeds is inexpensive and helps kids understand where our food comes from. Home gardening can also provide a sense of security and self-sufficiency during the uncertainty of our current national health crisis.

If you’ve been contemplating starting a garden to add fresh foods to your meals, mid-April marks our go-ahead and plant date. For a quick start-up guide, check out the newest on-demand webinar in Forsyth County Extension’s Connect with Food Gardening series. **Summer Fruits and Veggies to Grow from Seeds** covers the basics to get you growing in about 11 minutes. It’s on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niVBPvjAX-g&t=71s>

Learning with Extension – Events and Opportunities

As we practice safety and shelter at home, Forsyth County Extension programs have moved to the internet. To see what’s happening and how to join in, please visit our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/UGAExtensionForsythCounty/>

Stay safe, stay positive, and stay connected!

