



Urban Harvest

Growing gardens. Enriching lives.

Recycle Kitchen and Yard Wastes to Improve Your Garden and Your Planet

Bob Randall

In our house, we only put out the trash every 6-8 weeks! We have curbside recycling and every three months take glass, food cartons and plastic bags to places that recycle them. But a main reason we don't use the trash service much is that we recycle all of our yard wastes and all of our kitchen wastes. Homeowners produce a lot of plant wastes and kitchen scraps that can be easily recycled. It is fairly easy to recycle lawn clippings, leaves, branches, logs, Christmas trees, kitchen scraps, and coffee grounds.

The Benefits of Recycling

Recycled yard and kitchen wastes improve the clay soil dramatically nature's way within a few years. Your plants will grow better with less water because the clay particles will glue together into topsoil thus encouraging rain and irrigation to soak in and providing oxygen for root health. The surface organic matter will insulate the soil from surface heat, and organisms that decompose the organic matter will share their remains and wastes with the plants. Such organic wastes are expensive if purchased as compost or mulches.

Recycling reduces both our tax burden and the environmental cost in landfills and trash truck mileage. You won't need to buy as many trash bags, bag leaves, or pay for someone to bag them. Both your water bills and those of the city will be a little lower. Your trash won't smell and you won't have to put it out so often, and your front yard and your neighborhood won't look like trash barrel city one day in seven.

Recycling Kitchen Scraps

Kitchen scraps are full of nutrients, but smell and so most people either send them down garbage disposals or put them in the trash where they smell up the trash. However they can be easily and cheaply recycled. Some odorless scraps like corncobs, carrot tops, nutshells, and coffee grounds not eaten by dogs and rats can be discarded under mulch.

There are many ways to deal with other scraps, but the best I have found is the Green Cone Composting System. It is basically a plastic garbage can within another can, but instead of a bottom, it has an attached bin something like a laundry basket that holds the garbage below ground, drains it for rotting, but keeps out dogs and rats. The Green Cone may be purchased online for about \$105.

Recycling Lawn Clippings

Most people cut lawn too often at too short a height. Mowing is a form of plant surgery so it

damages the grass blades. For a healthy lawn, only mow when it is becoming unsightly and never mow on a schedule. In hot weather avoid mowing before late afternoon.

There is however One-Third Rule Of Pruning: "To prevent shock or death, no plant should ever be cut more than 1/3 at a time." This means that if you mow at 1 inch, you can only let lawn grow to 1.5 in., before it looks shaggy. Longer than this, the 1/3 rule will be violated. So you must cut off 1/2 inch each time you mow and this could be every five days. If instead you mow at 2 in. you cannot let the grass grow over 3 in. or the 1/3 rule will be violated and the lawn will look shaggy. So you cut off one inch. This one inch will obviously take longer to grow than did 1/2 inch (perhaps a week to ten days), so you will cut less often, do less work, cause less pollution, and need less irrigation since you aren't doing surgery so often.

If you mow at 3 in., you cannot let the lawn grow over 4.5 inches or the 1/3 rule will be violated and the lawn will look shaggy. So you cut off 1.5 inches every two weeks or in dry weather-- longer. Authorities nationwide believe that this height and schedule are best for lawn. This taller lawn will be much greener, healthier, need much less water, require many fewer mowings, create less noise and air pollution, and be less work and cost.

For obvious reasons, many lawn services dislike such infrequent visits, and may have difficulty mowing on an as-needed basis. But if you require it, some will do this. If you are in the habit of bagging clippings, longer grass will make the bagging more difficult. However, if you don't bag the clippings and just mulch the clippings where they fall, they will decompose quickly and return the nutrients to the lawn where they are needed.

Recycling Tree Wastes

Falling leaves and branches are nature's way of providing water-conserving soil-cooling mulch under the tree and calories for the microbes that provide nitrogen and other nutrients to the tree roots. Leaf mold is the single best and most expensive soil amendment you can buy in quantity! Thus if at all possible, leave leaves and small branches where they fall.

If that isn't possible, then mow the leaves and small branches to break them up and let them rot in place. If you must remove them, put them a few inches thick under other trees or shrubs. Cut the bigger branches and logs with saw, loppers, machete or shears until everything is in small flat pieces or is long and straight. Tuck the small pieces discretely under shrubs in out-of-the-way places to rot. Use straight logs as edgings on garden paths or for beds and hide big logs under low lying shrubs. Christmas trees get the same treatment.

Recycling Weeds Easily

Most garden weeds should be used the same way as mulch under shrubs and trees. They can be put in a compost as long as they aren't large or have long-lived roots like nutgrass and Bermuda grass. Go Green!

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