

## Is all compost the same?

Organic matter is broken down by microorganisms in the soil. During this process large pieces of organic materials are reduced to very small pieces. During this process the particles become a rich dark color and usually clump together. This process is referred to as **composting**. We refer to the finished material as **compost**.

The most important component of this process is the microorganisms. They are microscopic animals whose purpose in life is to feed on organic matter, break it down and then feed it back to the plants. They live very short, active lives, procreating rapidly. There are literally billions of them in a shovel full of soil. Most of these microbes live very near the plants root system, trading nutrients and helping to protect the roots and plant from harmful microorganisms.

These microbes will consumer any and all organic matter, be it good or bad. So **what you compost** is as important as **how you compost**. Quality compost is worth every cent you spend on it. It will have a balanced nutrient load and the microbes to release those nutrients over the growing season.

Many composting operations collect leaves, branches, grass clipping, fall garden waste, during the course of the year. The largest volume generated from the fallen leaves or garden waste in the autumn. These are great materials to compost. The carbon and nitrogen found in these materials are very important foods for the microbes. It is what these small creatures live for.

### **Some issues that need to be looked at with these types of raw materials:**

- High potassium and salts issue.
- Material can be loaded with weed seeds.
- The pH: usually higher than garden plants would like.

Can these imbalances be mitigated in the composting process? According to Brad Morgan of Morgan Composting in Evart, Michigan, “yes, as long as you know what the raw material is so you can build a recipe”. Brad compost many different materials, but mostly animal waste and he follows a recipe very closely. With a good recipe the potassium will be replaced on the soil particles, with the excess leaching out. It is very important to build up enough heat in the pile to kill the weed seeds, but not to allow it to cook to hot, this can suffocate the microbes. If the recipe includes the right amounts of minerals and cooks at the right temperature the pH will adjust to around 6.2 to 6.5 which is right where the plants like it.

The best proof of quality is in the health of your plants. You will be able to see it and, in the case of vegetables, you will be able to taste it. The taste of anything we eat is directly tied to what nutrients the plants are able absorb from the soil and the atmosphere. A balanced soil makes that possible.

Composting is a process that gives us an opportunity to remain a part of nature’s cycle. Doing it right makes the effort worthwhile. And if you don’t have the resources to do it yourself then be willing to spend top dollar for good quality compost. It is worth it.

