September 21, 2011

Photo Cutline: – The carbon content of fallen leaves is a perfect pairing for the nitrogen content of annual landscape plants in the compost bin.

Photo Credits: MU Extension

Fall leaves and faded garden plants make great compost
by Marlin Bates, University of Missouri Extension Horticulture Specialist, batesma@missouri.edu

Curbside leaf and brush removal dates will be here before we know it. The masses of tall brown paper sacks along the streets are a sure sign that the growing season has passed. If you have ever filled these sacks with fallen leaves, you might be interested in a less agonizing and more rewarding alternative this year.

It’s not likely that the proportion of fallen leaves to compostable plant material will result in the recommended 30:1 carbon-to-nitrogen ratio for compost piles. Since fallen leaves have a C:N ratio of about 50:1 and freshly uprooted green plants come in around 20:1 on average, a good approach is to add twice as much plant material as leaves to the compost bin. This will come close to the recommended ratio and allow for contributions from the kitchen compost pail.

Because adding fallen leaves and garden plants in layers will allow for better decomposition, it is best to collect those leaves frequently as they fall. This will result in several small contributions of leaf material to the bin: a better option than dealing with a lump sum of leaves at the end of the season. Couple this with regular culling of unproductive or fading garden plants and you’ll be able to contribute the appropriate ratio of each to the compost pile every week and make end-of-the-season clean up in the yard and garden easier.

If you have a more leaves than the compost pile can take, that probably means that you have a lot of shade on your landscape. Heavily shaded areas where turf is difficult to establish may best be converted to a “forest floor” landscape where leaves are allowed to aggregate among shade tolerant perennial plants. Otherwise, surplus leaves can be spread directly onto the vegetable garden to decompose over winter.
Regardless of how you build and maintain a compost pile, the single best thing you can add to it is a compost thermometer. These devices are longer than a typical thermometer and typically have ranges of temperatures highlighted to let you know if the pile is actively composting or not. There may be no better way to ensure that your composting efforts are paying off.

To learn more about composting and for plans to build your own bins, visit http://extension.missouri.edu for our guides “Making and Using Compost,” and “How to Build a Compost Bin.”