

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle - Yard Waste

by Victoria Reinhardt

In the last several months there has been much publicity about yard waste. Some of the comments I heard regarding composting led me to believe that clarification about this form of waste management could prove helpful. It should be noted that since 1990, it has been illegal in the metropolitan area to place yard waste in the trash. As I thought about a good analogy to explain composting, I thought about recycling. We have all heard the three R's of recycling - Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. By implementing these three steps, individuals have a dramatic impact on creating a healthy, less wasteful environment. I think these three "R's" can be applied to yard waste management and, just as above, I think individuals can make a big difference.

How do we "reduce" yard waste? In my case, I use fertilizer sparingly and when the grass is mowed, I leave the grass clippings on the yard. Once I've "reduced" the amount of yard waste I produce, I move to the second R, "Reuse". In the fall, I rake as many leaves as I can onto my flower beds, and around my shrubs to protect the roots from the effects of our extremely cold winter weather. Another way to "reuse" yard waste, which includes grass clippings and leaves, is to compost these materials at a site on your property. This is also known as backyard composting. Finished compost makes an excellent soil amendment or mulch. To get more information on backyard composting, please call the Ramsey County Extension Office at 704-2070.

Finally we can move on to the third R, "Recycle". Residents have three main options for "recycling" their yard waste. I use the term recycling because just as the cans and glass that you save for recycling are ultimately available to you as a new product, so to is yard waste. There is a high demand for yard waste compost as a soil amendment or mulch. If you choose not to "reduce" or "reuse" your yard waste, then you can turn it over to a larger operation for composting, or "recycling" in one of the following three ways. Firstly, residents (and businesses) can pay a refuse hauler or other collector to pick up yard waste. Several communities provide for yard waste pickup as part of contracts with one or more refuse haulers for organized residential collections. Haulers can still legally collect yard waste, as long as it is not mixed with other garbage.

Secondly, residents (and businesses) can deliver yard waste to a private yard waste site (all are located outside of Ramsey County) or a private transfer station (in or outside of Ramsey County) for a fee.

Finally, residents (but not businesses) can deliver yard waste to a County yard waste site at no charge. Ramsey County's yard waste system, in service since 1983, addresses the yard waste ban by providing convenient drop-off locations throughout the County for residents. Ramsey County currently operates eight yard waste sites which residents may use to "recycle" leaves and grass clippings. The sites are open 38 hours per week from April through November. At three sites, all yard waste received is transported to private yard waste vendors. At the other 5 sites, composting occurs onsite. The sites serve about 330,000 site visitors per year representing 65,000 households that deliver leaves and 32,000 households that deliver grass clippings. The sites are located in Saint Paul (Frank and Sims; Battle Creek; Midway, and Summit Hill) Arden Hills, Maplewood,

Mounds View and White Bear Township. In addition, residents of the City of Roseville can have leaves picked up by the city (which began charging a fee for this service this year). Roseville also offers a drop-off site for leaves for its residents. 85% of the leaves and grass clippings generated by County residents is managed at the County's yard waste sites. Survey results show that of households with leaves to rake, 49% or 65,000 households used the County's yard waste sites. Of residents with grass clippings, about 21% or 32,000 households use the County's yard waste sites. About 100,000 cubic yards, or 8 to 9 percent of the TOTAL mixed municipal solid waste stream (all of our garbage) in Ramsey County is managed at the sites each year. That is a lot of material being kept out of the waste stream.

Composting is basically an accelerated natural process which can help maintain and improve the environment of Ramsey County by creating a compost product from yard waste materials. This benefit comes whether you "reuse" your yardwaste by backyard composting or "recycle" your yardwaste through a larger composting facility.

Finally, I would like to speak to some of the concerns I heard in the last few months about yard waste. When properly sited, designed and operated, yard waste composting sites are environmentally friendly. One issue brought up was odor. The strongest odors from a compost site come from the turning or moving the old piles of materials that are still decomposing. This is especially true when there is mostly grass in the yard waste. There is very little odor from transporting newly dumped leaves or finished compost or from pushing freshly dumped leaves together. This is where proper operations come into play. I have another analogy for you - just as we must practice good hygiene or risk "offending" our neighbors, so to must yard waste compost sites. A well run operation is akin to good hygiene. Another tip would be to simply keep grass out of the mix entirely. Let the clippings stay on your lawn. A common misconception is that chemicals are used on yard waste compost sites. Water is sometimes applied but oftentimes not even water is used. Finally, on the issue of rodents. Yard waste compost sites do not attract rodents - rodents can, however, be a problem if you are composting food waste. Other types of composting are very different from yard waste composting.

Practicing the three R's, "reduce, reuse, recycle" when taking personal responsibility for your yard waste allows you to make your own choices on how your yard waste is handled. The more each of us can reduce and reuse (at no cost), the less we have to recycle (at an increasing cost). We not only help our environment, but also our pocketbooks.