No, I am not referring to oil, although that would be nice as well. I am referring to turning yard waste like grass clippings, fallen leaves weeds, and kitchen table scraps into nutrient rich, black compost.

Landfills are filling up. Nature is becoming polluted with trash thrown about by careless people. Those of us who care enough to take care of our resources are looking for ways to save the planet, go green, or simply do our part to keep the earth safe and clean. One way to do that is through composting.

There are four basic components of a compost pile. Brown (carbon) ingredients include things like dry leaves, chipped up wood from pruning trees and shrubs, shredded paper, straw or saw dust. Green (nitrogen) ingredients include things like grass clippings, coffee grounds, tea bags (remove staples), weeds, manure (not cat or dog), and kitchen scraps (not meat, bones, fat or oils). Air is needed for good non-smelly compost. Compost that has a vinegar smell or acid smell is most likely too wet. Fluffing the pile will help add air back into the pile and reduce the smell. Water is needed, just not too much. If the pile dries out too much, the microbes will stop working and the pile will cool down. The pile should be moist to the touch, but not to the point of being able to squeeze water out when a handful is squeezed.

To get the proper activity out of the compost pile, the proper Carbon to Nitrogen (C:N) ratio needs to be maintained. A good range would be between 30:1 (30 parts carbon to 1 part nitrogen) and 50:1 or about ½ to 1/3 of the pile should be from a carbon source and the rest from a nitrogen source.

Most people prefer to compost in a bin. Compost bins can be made from a variety of materials including concrete blocks, wood crates, or other building materials. There are also commercially available compost bins made from recycled plastic. More important than what the bin is made out of is how the compost is cared for.

There are two basic methods of composting fast (1 – 3 months) and slow (3 – 8 months). The fast methods requires you to have all the (Continued on page 4)
Featured Plant

*Liquidambar styraciflura*
American Sweetgum

The American Sweetgum tree may be the bane of some homeowner’s existence because of their troublesome fruit. Perhaps I have gone a little too far with that statement but my girlfriend, Eileen would agree. She tripped over one of those prickly little “gumballs” in her driveway and fell, breaking one ankle and cracking the other. She was forced to live in a hospital bed in the middle of her living room for several weeks. But I digress… I think Michael Dirr put it a bit more eloquently in his entry of the widely recognized *Dirr’s Hardy Trees and Shrubs*. He states “This lovely tree would be on every gardener’s wish list were it not for the woody, spiny, capsular, 1- to 1 ½ - in. –diameter fruit, which abscise through fall and winter.” (228)

![Image of American Sweetgum tree](Figure1.jpg)

**Figure 1:** Fruit of the American Sweetgum tree (gumball)

Now that I have bashed this tree’s fruiting problem, let’s talk about its attributes. The star-shaped leaves of this deciduous tree put on an incredible show in the fall displaying gorgeous shades of red, burgundy, yellow, and orange. The tree is a moderate to rapid grower and highly resistant to insect attack, making it a good candidate for reforestation and land reclamation projects. Reaching typical heights of 60 to 80 feet it is not uncommon to find them exceeding the 100-foot mark. These trees grow in a very straight form, which makes it a good species for lumber, furniture, musical instrument components and veneer. Other attributes of the Sweetgum include the ability to fix nitrogen in the soil and provide large areas of shade.

If you have these trees growing in your landscape but don’t like the chore of hand picking their fruit out of garden beds and lawns each year, you can hire an arborist to inject a de-flowering agent or growth-regulating chemical into the tree. A word of caution, this process has to be repeated several times during the proper stages of flower development in order to be effective. This could get pricey. It may be easier and cost-effective to remove the tree if it is a major issue. If all else fails, follow the old adage, “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” Why not collect the gumballs, spray paint them gold and use them as Christmas tree ornaments?

References and information resources:

www.sfp.forprod.vt.edu/factsheets/sweetgum.pdf

By Tina Stricklen

Upcoming Events

- **Plant Clinic** at Clayton Farm and Community Market Saturday, August 21
• from 9:00am until 1:00pm. Master Gardeners will be available to answer gardening questions and identify garden pests, weeds, and disease problems.

• Fire Ant Workshop at Johnston County Agriculture Building 2736 NC Highway 210, Smithfield, NC 27577. The workshop will begin at 7:00pm and last until 8:00pm on Thursday, September 9.

Insect Investigator
Stingless Mini-Wasps
Order: HYMENOPTERA

Many people think wasps are bad or non-beneficial. On the contrary, many wasps help control the population of the truly “bad” insects in our landscape. Not easily seen by the naked eye the Stingless Mini-wasps are a natural enemy that contributes to biological control. These members of the Hymenoptera order prey on moths, beetle and fly larvae, insect eggs and various other insects. They do so by laying eggs inside their host. The wasp larva consumes their pray from within. This sounds pretty grotesque but a necessary step in the battle against insect pests. For more information on this or other “good” bugs, visit NCSU’s Biological Control Information Center at cipm.ncsu.edu/ent/biocontrol/index.htm

What’s in Season?

Tomato
*Solanum lycopersicum*

Family: Solanaceae (nightshade)
By Tina Stricklen

So many tomatoes, so little time…. or so it seems. By now, everyone should be heavy into their tomato-growing frenzy. Personally, I have been battling high heat and humidity, marauding deer and a general lack of rain. If the deer haven’t munched my prized heirlooms, then the heat has robbed me of my long awaited ‘mater sandwich experience. It’s gotten so bad that I broke down and bought a German Johnson from a nearby produce stand.

If you are like me you are eager to try as many varieties as possible. However, with so many available, it is easy to become overwhelmed with the options. Perusing the list of types alone can be daunting. There are slicers, cherries, paste/canning, really big ones, saladette/pear and non-reds to choose from. Of course, you will want to keep in mind that the best place to start is with a variety that is disease resistant since our summers tend to be hot and humid. Here is a list of the top ten picks that includes both hybrids and heirloom type tomatoes: Better Boy, Brandywine, Cherokee Purple, Beefsteak, Super Sweet 100, Big Boy, San Marzano, Mortgage Lifter, Yellow Pear and Celebrity.

If your luck has been better than mine this summer, you should be harvesting lots of tomatoes. You may be asking yourself, what can I do with these delicious beauties? There is always
the freeze-now-thaw-later approach. Simply place your cleaned tomatoes in freezer bags and store until needed. Perhaps on a cold winter day when you need a boost in your soup pot? If you prefer not to have the skins in your soups and sauces, you can blanch the tomatoes first making it easy to remove the skins before freezing.

If you want to impress your neighbors at the next potluck dinner this summer, you should try the quick and easy Panzanella salad. This recipe works well with either cherry type (cut or whole) tomatoes or bite-size pieces of larger-types. Panzanella is an Italian dish originating in the regions of Tuscany that utilizes day-old bread. If you have fresh bread simply cut into cubes and roast them off in a 350 degree oven until golden.

**Ingredients:**

- 2/3 pound day-old bread, cut into 1-inch cubes (about 6 cups)
- 2 large tomatoes (about 1 pound) trimmed and each cut into bite-size pieces
- ¼ cup sliced cucumbers
- ½ cup sliced red onion
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons red-wine vinegar
- 10 fresh basil leaves, shredded

**Preparation:**

In a serving bowl stir together the bread, tomatoes, cucumber, onion, oil, vinegar, basil and salt and pepper to taste until the salad is combined well. This recipe pairs the great combination of bread and tomatoes so you can’t go wrong!

www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/Panzanella-12529

**Black Gold (Cont. from pg 1)**

ingredients together to build the pile at the start, layer the ingredients with browns, greens, browns, greens. Add a thin layer of soil every couple of layers (the soil will have the microbes to get things started), and moisten the pile every couple of layers as well. The pile should be about 3 to 4 feet tall and wide when completed. Every three to four days the pile should be turned to aerate it and add some more greens, like kitchen scraps or grass clippings to keep the pile hot.

For slow composting, the pile can be added to gradually and turned every so often to add air to the pile. The drawbacks to slow composting may include: the pile may be smelly; the pile may attract pests like raccoons or rats; the pile may not heat up enough to kill weed seeds or diseases; and over time the nutrients may leach from the pile. Having a small yard myself, I do not produce enough yard waste to build a proper compost pile (except for the amount of leaves that fall from the trees and I use those as mulch) so I prefer to use worms to compost my kitchen scraps. Using worms is called vermicomposting and is an article for another issue. Sufficed to say it takes up less room, works quicker, and the worms can stay inside during the winter.

For more information on backyard composting contact your local NC Cooperative Extension office or information can be found on the World Wide Web at www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/pdf/ag-467.pdf or www.p2pays.org/compost/composting101.asp.

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**August Garden Tasks**

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

- Collect soil samples for testing so you'll know how much fertilizer and lime to add this fall. Test your lawn, flowerbeds and vegetable garden. Testing should be done once every 3 years.
- Water deeply but infrequently this encourages a deep and extensive root system for better drought tolerance.
- Control fungal diseases by watering early in the morning, allowing the sun to dry water droplets from the foliage.
LAWN CARE

- Prepare your lawn for fall seeding. August is the best time to prepare for planting cool season grasses for the optimal planting time in September.
- Water lawns when the grass blades are just starting to curl or footprints remain when you walk across the lawn. Watering too often encourages plants with a shallow root system that do not handle drought well.
- Maintenance needs are different for each grass type. Call Cooperative Extension for a Lawn Maintenance Calendar.

TREES, SHRUBS & ORNAMENTALS

- Plan for Fall Bulbs - Autumn-blooming crocus and colchicum add color in the fall. They are not always available locally; consider ordering them now from a mail-order source. They need to be planted in September.
- Mulch trees and shrubs with a 2-3” layer of mulch to keep roots cool, conserve moisture, and control competing weeds and grasses. Leave 3-4 inches between the mulch and the trunk of the tree/shrub.
- Avoid pruning shrubs and trees during late summer. Pruning stimulates new growth which will not have sufficient time to harden off before cold weather.
- If a foundation shrub is overgrown and blocks a window or creates a security risk, some pruning is needed. Remove as little live wood as possible now, then plan more drastic pruning for February. Consider replanting using a shrub whose mature size will not require pruning for that area.
- Add phosphorus and potassium now according to soil test results. These nutrients help plants withstand the winter.
- Cut back leggy impatiens and other summer flowers, then fertilize them. They'll re-grow within a few weeks, and look great up till frost.

EDIBLES

- Examine fruit trees periodically for scale infestations and mark with flagging tape. Applying summer or horticultural oil can keep them from getting out of hand.
- Caring for Strawberries - Now that strawberries have finished bearing, prolong their life by cutting off the tops without injuring the crown. Thin plants to 12 inch spacing. Fertilize with 1/2 pound of 5-10-10 per 25 sq.ft. Weed and apply mulch to conserve moisture and reduce weed growth.
- Allow Peppers to Turn Red - Peppers allowed to turn red will be sweeter and higher in beta-carotene. Even jalapenos which are traditionally harvested green, mature to tasty red peppers.
- Fill in empty spaces in the garden with fall crops of lettuce, collard, and other cool-weather vegetables. Beans planted in late summer can produce a crop before frost.
- Watch squash plants for sudden wilting. A second generation of squash vine borers is hatching. You may be able to save the plant by removing the caterpillar, then covering the injured area of the vine with moist soil to encourage rooting.

LANDSCAPE IDEAS

- Look for interesting plants in nurseries that can be added to the garden this fall.
- Late bloomers add color and life to the steamy August garden. Visit botanical gardens and arboreta or the neighbor down the street to see what’s blooming in the area this time of the year.
- Consider ornamental grasses, the light airy texture will look good well into winter.
- Keep Extra Containers for Instant Color - Plant some extra flowering containers periodically for backup color. When one starts looking spent, you can move another into its place. Replant the old one or take it to the plant hospital for recuperation.