

Eye on the Environment: Same yard waste can be beneficial or harmful

By Kelly Hahs

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Yard waste is just what it sounds like: all the natural plant matter no longer wanted in your yard.

Lawn clippings, hedge trimmings and fallen leaves are all yard waste, but though their roles in your living garden are over, their environmental contributions are not. Yard waste can be beneficial or damaging, based on the choices you make.

Whether in a compost bin, storm drain or natural channel, yard waste breaks down by the same mechanisms and forms the same products, but the effects of those products on our environment will be very different, depending on where they end up. Though yard waste might be 100 percent natural, improper disposal can turn it into a pollutant.

It is easy to dispose of yard waste responsibly. Place it in your designated green waste bin for pickup by your local hauler, or compost it and use it to give new life to your garden.

When composted properly, yard waste is broken down by bacteria and becomes a nutrient-rich substance beneficial to gardens and inexpensive to produce. Compost can be used as mulch around plants to help retain moisture and reduce the amount of water required to keep your garden growing. It is a natural fertilizer that provides nitrogen, phosphorous and other essential nutrients for plants. Compost also is great for improving the structure of soil, especially sandy or clay earth, so they hold the right combination of moisture and air to promote healthy roots and plant growth.

In contrast, blowing, raking, sweeping or washing your yard waste into streets, gutters or creeks creates all kinds of problems. Not only is it unpleasant to look at, but yard waste also can clog storm drains and flood-control channels, resulting in flooding and damage the next time it rains. Even when it doesn't rain, yard waste can accumulate and collect moisture, creating a mosquito-breeding ground.

Gutters are part of the storm-drain system and lead directly to waterways without any treatment along the way. This means that anything left on the street, including yard waste, will eventually wind up in creeks, rivers and the ocean.

The same breakdown process that occurs in a compost bin will occur in our waterways, but the effects are very different. Decomposing plant material removes oxygen from water, leaving insufficient amounts for fish and other aquatic life to breathe. The nutrients produced promote algal blooms, which also break down and remove even more oxygen from the water. The rotting plant material can help form shallow pools where water stagnates, and the only life it is capable of supporting is mosquito larvae.

Yard waste also can choke out native vegetation that provides habitat for wildlife and helps stabilize stream banks. Unstable stream banks erode, and this eroded material causes sedimentation that makes water cloudy and unsuitable for aquatic wildlife. Eroded stream banks also provide less protection from flooding.

Gardening isn't for everybody, so if you don't want to help your garden grow by composting, deposit your yard waste into the designated bin and keep it out of gutters and storm drains. You will be helping yourself, your community and your environment.

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On the Net:

<http://www.cleanwatershed.org>

<http://www.wasteless.org/gardening>

<http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/conserve/rrr/composting/index.htm>



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