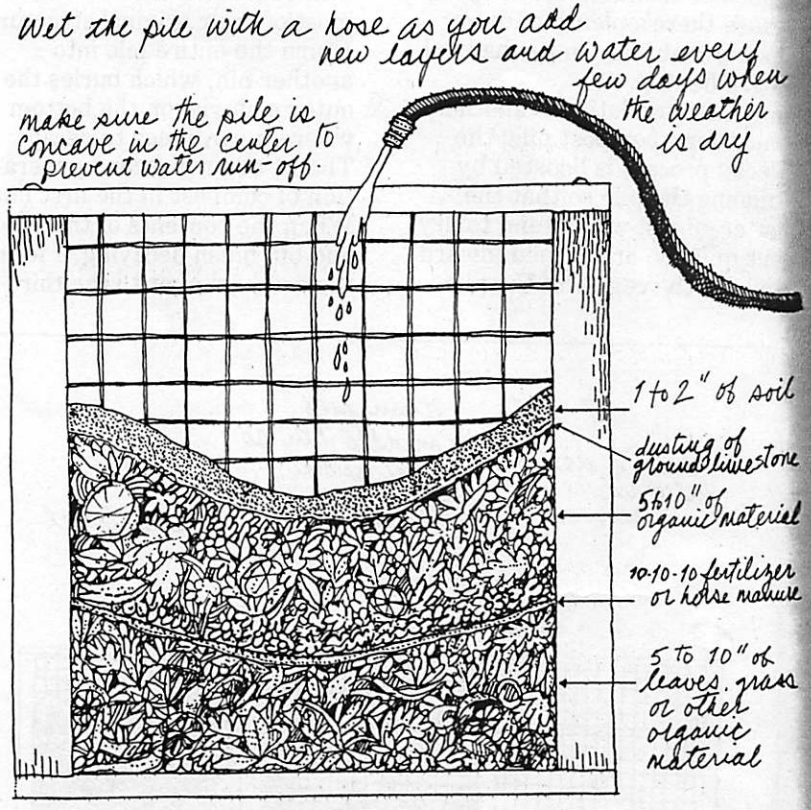
THE COMPOSTER, OR THE BROWN GOLD CADILLAC

August is a month of ample harvests that leave behind bare stalks, old leaves, and discarded tops, so this is a good month to put a compost bin into use. There's just nothing like compost for plants; if there's a magic elixir for the garden, compost is it. I use a sturdy 3-bin composter in the Victory Garden, and I've included instructions so you can build one of your own. You'll never regret it.

Compost, as far as I'm concerned, is the gardener's best friend. It enriches the soil as it lightens it, and at the same time it increases the soil's ability to hold moisture. It's made from decaying plants, so it contains not only the major elements for healthy plant growth, but many of the vital trace elements as well. Which is why I call compost brown gold, and my fancy but simply constructed composter the Cadillac of composters.

Compost is made from a series of layers, like a rich Italian cake, but neither the sequence nor the proportions of the layers is strict. I start my compost with a layer of leaves, grass, weeds, straw, or some other organic material, spreading it over the bottom of the bin 5 to 10 inches deep. (I never use grass clippings from a lawn that's had weed killer used on it because the weed killer may stay active during the composting period and remain potent even after the compost is put on the garden, at which time it will kill the crops.) Over this organic layer I scatter a couple of handfuls of 10-10-10 fertilizer or a shovelful of horse manure to speed up the decaying process.

The real substance of compost is the organic refuse that comes from the garden or kitchen: faded flowers, banana peels, cornstalks, weeds, grapefruit rinds, old plants and



you live you will be able to have a successful garden." (A regional chart has also been included to help the reader adapt the book's information to whatever part of the country he or she lives in.)

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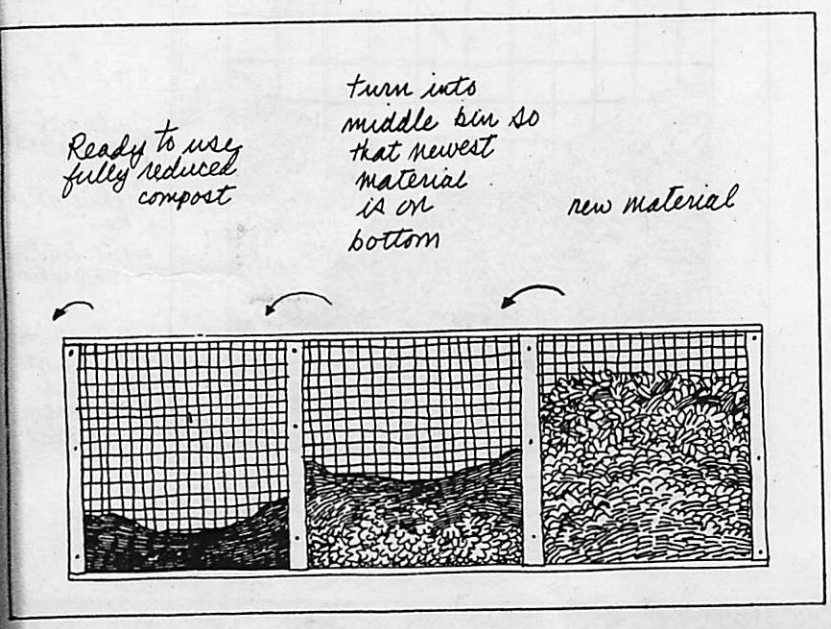
leaves. I don't add either meat or bones, as they won't decay with the other materials and they'll give off a powerful odor, attracting a menagerie of undesirable animals. When the layer of refuse is another 5 or 10 inches deep I dust it with ground limestone, and then add an inch or two of soil to prevent the compost from smelling like a garbage heap. Water is critical to the decay process so I always make sure that the growing compost heap is concave in the center to prevent run-off. I wet the pile with a hose as I add the layers, and I water it every few days if the weather is dry. I also continue to supplement the mixture with ground limestone, fertilizer, and soil. (It's possible to buy various materials that claim to speed up the composting process, but I consider them unnecessary because there's plenty of decay bacteria already in the natural ingredients.)

Air circulation is another must for a compost pile; the decay process is boosted by turning the pile so that the outer edges, which tend to dry out quickly, are turned inward toward the center of the pile.

This is where the 3-bin arrangement comes in handy. When the pile has decayed to a uniform yellow-brown and the individual elements have lost most of their original structure, I turn the entire pile into another bin, which buries the outer material on the bottom where it continues to decay. Then I begin a second generation of compost in the first bin. When the contents of the second bin finish decaying, I fork the compost over to the third



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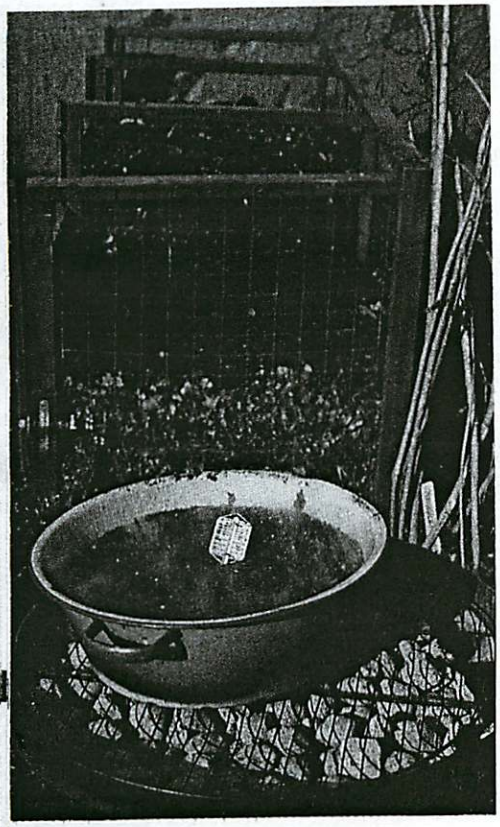

Pasteurizing compost

bin for storage until I want to use it in the garden. In the harvest months of August and September, when the amount of garden refuse is staggering, the composter's 3-bin setup provides some much-needed storage room.

The compost is ready to use when it is crumbly and dark brown. Its texture is relatively uniform but there is always a discernible leaf or piece of stalk. The speed with which the material decays depends to a large extent on heat. During hot summer months the entire process can be over in 6 weeks; in the winter, very little decay occurs. So while it's a good idea to add kitchen waste to the composter during the cold months, nothing much will happen to it until the spring.

Compost is a treat for outdoor gardens and for indoor plants as well, but it needs to be pasteurized before it can be brought indoors in order to cleanse it of the assortment of bugs, weed seeds, and other undesirable elements that no indoor gardener wants introduced to houseplants. Pasteurization is a heating process, and it smells to high heaven. (One gardener, who tried to pasteurize his compost in the kitchen, claims that he and his family considered moving to a motel for a week.) To avoid the worst of the smell, I pasteurize outside in the garden. I light a charcoal barbecue grill and set an old shallow pan filled with compost over the fire. I let the whole mixture cook at 180 degrees for 30 minutes, using a meat thermometer to judge the temperature. I do three or four batches and then store the cooled compost in a plastic trash bag for the winter.

Building the Composter

1. Lay the bottom members on a flat section of ground: put two 9-foot lengths of 2" × 4" lumber 33 inches apart from outer edge to outer edge.

2. Cut 4 of the 12-foot lengths of lumber into 4 pieces each. Two of the pieces should be 32 inches long to form the sides of each of the bin dividers. The other two pieces should be 36 inches long, for the top and bottom of each divider. (Assembled in this way, the joints are protected from the elements.)

3. Staple a 3-foot square of wire fencing to one side of each divider. Drill and bolt the dividers to the bottom members, making sure that the wire on the end dividers faces outward.

4. Brace the back of the composter with a 9-foot strip of 2" × 4" lumber across the top of the dividers.

5. Cut a 9-foot length of wire and fasten it to the back of the composter with galvanized poultry-wire staples.

6. The front end of each bin is closed off as the bins are filled. We use 6 1" × 6" boards for each bin, with staples or nails partially driven into the long edges to allow for ventilation space. The boards slide into position along grooved strips nailed to the front of each divider. The two outside strips are L-shaped, and the inside strips are T-shaped; both are cut on a table saw from 2" × 4" lumber.

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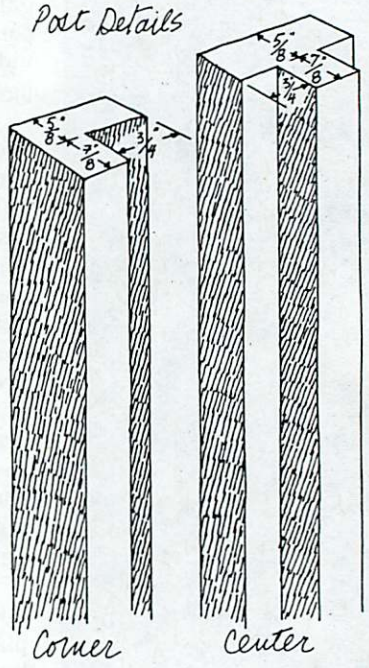
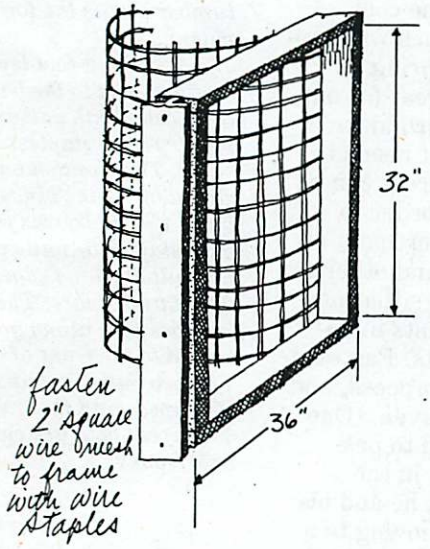
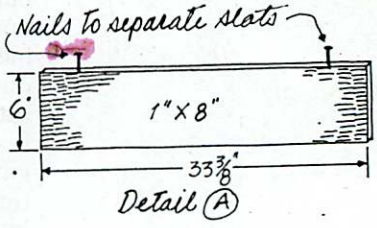
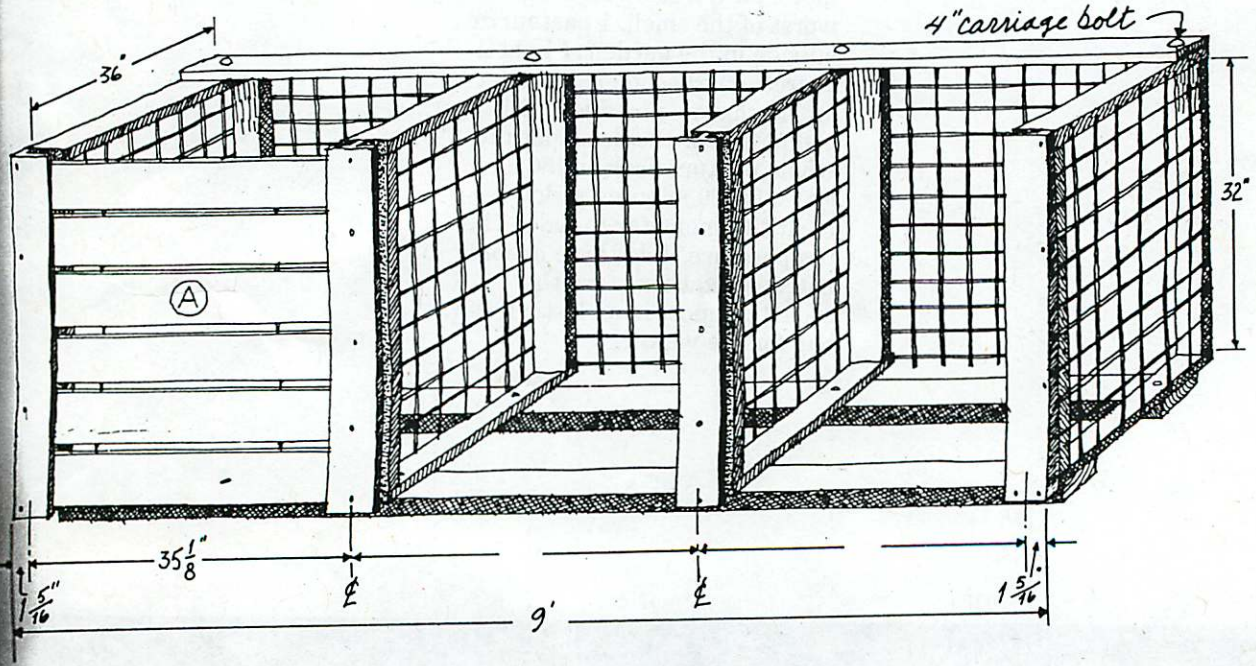
Materials	
2" × 4" framing lumber, treated with a good wood preservative (do not use creosote)	*3 9-foot lengths (for bottom members and top brace)* *5 12-foot lengths (for dividers and grooved strips)*
1" × 6" common pine	*18 3-foot lengths (for front slats)*
2" × 2" welded, galvanized 36" dog-wire or wire fencing	*21-foot length (for dividers and back section)*
⅝" galvanized carriage bolts, 4 inches long	*12 (to secure dividers to bottom members and top brace)*
16-penny galvanized spikes	*5 pounds (to fasten the sides of the dividers)*
Galvanized poultry-wire staples	*250 (to secure wire fencing to dividers and back section)*









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