

What's the (organic) matter?

You've probably heard "leave the leaves" before.

Leaf litter is home to countless invertebrates, many of which are good bugs. These tiny animals overwinter in the cover that leaves provide. But even if you aren't interested in supporting the native insect population, you should consider putting those piles of leaves to work. Leaves are an excellent source of organic matter, and organic matter is very good for our soils.



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Organic matter is an essential component of healthy soil. It helps to give clay soils better drainage and sandy soils better moisture retention. Organic matter slowly releases nutrients into the soil. It provides habitat within the soil for microorganisms, improves aeration in clay soils, and also helps make soil more workable, or friable. Surprisingly, despite its importance, organic matter usually comprises only 2-8% of the soil by volume. If you think of rich, fertile soil, that dark color you picture comes from organic matter.

In the soil, organic matter is simply plant or animal tissue in various stages of decay. Leaves, yard trimmings, grass clippings, produce scraps, manure, etc., are all sources. Paper, coffee grinds, sawdust and bark are all plant products that can decompose and incorporate into the soil. These residues of living organisms break down and improve the soil. Nature is the original recycle center. Here in the south, with our high temperatures, the process occurs pretty quickly, so there isn't time for much organic matter to build up in our soils.

The practice of composting can create a renewable source of organic matter for your garden. Composting is just a way of consolidating and speeding up the natural decomposition

of organic matter. The organic matter (like leaves) that humans consider waste can often be composted and used as a soil amendment. For instance, the end product from composting just leaves is called leaf mold. Fall is a great time to start a compost pile. The HGIC online factsheet 1600, Composting, is a thorough primer on the process.

Composting does not have to be smelly or unsightly. It is also not a magic bullet for dealing with weeds or plant diseases, so it's best to dispose of those materials elsewhere and not try to compost them. It's important to avoid composting grasses that have been sprayed with persistent herbicides like picloram, clopyralid and aminopyralid. Even manure from animals that have consumed these grasses can cause herbicide damage in your garden. Chop or shred large items like limbs or fibrous tissues like cornstalks before adding them to the compost pile.

Once your compost is ready, it will be finely textured, dark in color and have a lovely earthy smell. Incorporate 1-2 inches of compost to 6-8 inches of soil. Double-digging or tilling will work everything together. Alternately, 2-3 inches of compost can be an excellent mulch substitute. Limit the amount of compost used in a potting mix to no more than ¼ by volume. Its moisture retaining properties can leave your containers too soggy. One thing is for sure; you will find you never have enough compost!

All Extension offices will be closed for Thanksgiving on Nov. 28-29. Piedmont area offices will be closed Dec. 4 for staff training.

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ROBERT JORDAN | INDEX-JOURNAL

City Judge Ed Strickland swears in Councilmembers Matt Gambrell, James Jackson, Faye Thomas, Benji Greeson and Mayor Trey Edwards during Wednesday's Abbeville City Council meeting.

Abbeville city residents might see fee hike to pay for storm relief

By **ROBERT JORDAN**
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ABBEVILLE — Belts will tighten as the city tries to raise money to finance relief efforts from Hurricane Helene.

Abbeville City Council approved first reading of an ordinance that will add \$2.77 to power bills to all city residents. The move was prompted by bills coming in and the realization that reimbursement by FEMA for expenses could take from one to two years, according to City Manager Blake Stone.

The ordinance calls for a 2% electric rate increase and ending the city covering credit card fees in order to increase revenue to

know this would be coming and Stone said the ordinance can be delayed to notify them.

What is the alternative, Mayor Edwards asked. The first thing is the damage was an act of God and the city is putting the fee on residents for something they had no control over.

This is more than a time issue, Stone said. The city is facing a wait of 12 to 24 months along with up to \$2.5 million in costs for relief efforts. Vendors will not compromise on that, he said.

In addition, city officials have to face the possibility that FEMA will not provide 100% reimbursement for expenses, Stone said. How much the city gets will be a mitigating factor.

its inventory, the McGowan Re-conduct Project's inventory and pay for linemen who assisted with the recovery, according to the ordinance.

People are complaining of high utility rates, Councilmember Crawford said. How can the city bring the bills down? Other people will ask how residents might be reimbursed when FEMA provides funds, he said.

Removal of the fee will be council's decision, Stone said.

"I can assure you as soon as a penny comes in from FEMA, you will know," he said.

In other business:

■ Council approved issuance of two bonds for \$370,000 and