

A HOW-TO BACKYARD COMPOSTING GUIDE

Every little bit does help.

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WHAT IS COMPOSTING?

Compost is a dark, crumbly, earthy smelling material that is great for your garden.

Composting is the natural breakdown of organic material (kitchen and yard materials) by micro-organisms (bacteria and fungi), insects and worms. Any organic material in nature will decompose by itself. Composting in a backyard composter is a controlled way of letting this process take place at your home. This guide is designed to help you with your backyard composting efforts.

SETTING UP MY COMPOSTER



Composters come in all shapes and sizes and are usually available at your local hardware store. Locate the composter in an area with good drainage and one that is accessible year round (partial shade is preferred).

Loosen the soil over the area on which you are going to place your backyard composter. This will allow soil organisms (insects and worms) to move up the pile.

WHAT CAN I COMPOST?

GREENS



From the Kitchen

- Vegetable scraps
- Fruit or fruit peels
- Pastas/breads
- Coffee grounds/filters
- Tea bags
- Crushed egg shells



From the Yard

- Garden wastes
- Grass

BROWNS



From the Yard

- Leaves
- Brush (break into smaller pieces)
- Wood chips
- Sawdust



From the Home

- Shredded paper

WHAT CAN'T I COMPOST (AND WHY) ?



From the Kitchen

Dairy products

Fish scraps

Meats, bones or fats



Oils



Here's why: These are in fact all quite compostable. However, if the compost process is not very closely managed they can result in odour generation and animal attraction.

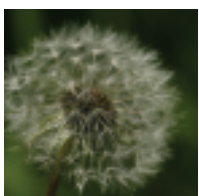
From the Yard



Diseased plants

Weed heads gone to seed

Pet wastes



Here's why: The backyard composting process does not typically kill plant diseases and weed seeds. Pet wastes are not very compostable.

HOW DO I COLLECT COMPOSTABLE WASTES IN THE KITCHEN AND GARDEN?



The best way to collect food scraps is to use a dedicated plastic container. This can be stored under the sink or on the counter. When you are preparing your meals you can put the scraps right in the container.

Leaf and yard wastes can be collected throughout the year. It is good to have a mix of these wastes in the backyard composter.

Tip:

Cutting compostable materials into smaller pieces gives the micro-organisms more surface area on which to decompose, resulting in a faster composting process. This means that you could cut kitchen waste into smaller cubes. Leaves can be shredded using your lawnmower. If you are adding paper, consider shredding before adding.

PUTTING WASTES IN MY COMPOSTER

Wastes can be divided into two simple groups – greens and browns. Greens (which are often but not always green in colour) are typically nutrient rich and moist. These need to be balanced with brown wastes which are low in nutrients and dryer.

You always want to make sure that the materials in your composter are moist (like a wrung out sponge) and not soaking wet. It is easy to start your composter with a layer of browns such as leaves. Greens can be added on top of these. It is useful to mix green wastes into the brown wastes. You want to maintain a good mix of greens and browns so remember to add both wastes.



Tip:

Save some bags of leaves in the fall to add throughout the year.

MANAGING MY COMPOSTER

The bacteria and fungi that decompose your waste rely on the same air that you or I use to breathe. Using a pitchfork or similar is a good way to mix the wastes in the composter and introduce air into the mix. It is good to turn it every few weeks. Not turning it only means that the composting process will be a bit slower. Once your composter is full you can lift the bin, move it into an adjacent position and fork the material back into the bin.

The bacteria and fungi need water to survive. Too much water though means that there will not be enough air and the process may slow (and stink). Keep the compost damp.

The compost process will often generate some heat which means that the bacteria and fungi are hard at work. In the winter time composters will often freeze. The composting process will start up again in the spring.

WHEN IS MY COMPOST READY?

The speed of the process is directly related to the types of wastes you put in your composter, how often you turn it, and how wet (or dry) it is. Under optimum conditions you could produce a compost in 6 months or so. In reality, composts take about a year or so to produce.

Your compost will be brown and crumbly and may smell a bit like soil. It may not be as pretty as the compost you buy at the store, but it will provide the same benefit in your garden. To harvest your compost, dig it out or lift the entire composter off. You can screen out any small bits of uncomposted materials and throw these back in.

HOW DO I USE MY COMPOST?

When you use compost you are closing the loop. What started off as something removed from the land is being returned to the land. The key with using compost is to remember that it is not soil. You can apply a layer of 1-2 inches on your flower beds or in your garden remembering it is important to mix it in with soil.

You can also topdress your lawns with a thin layer (1/4") of compost. Water your lawn shortly after applying the compost so that it comes into contact with the soil below. You can use compost as a mulch layer around shrubs or trees.

Tip:

Do not plant directly into compost.

TROUBLE-SHOOTING

My pile looks too wet.

Mix in dryer materials such as fall leaves.

My pile looks too dry.

Mix in some moist materials such as food wastes or grass. Add water using a watering can or hose.

My pile stinks.

Check moisture. Mix pile.

My pile has flies.

Remember to cover your green wastes with brown wastes.

My pile has a lot of insects.

No problem really. The insects will help break down wastes. (See above).