

BACKYARD COMPOSTING

Composting is the natural process of breaking down organic materials into a soil-like material. Compost added to soil improves soil structure, and adds nutrients needed for healthy plant growth.

Benefits of composting

- * Increases the organic matter in soil
- * Improves soil fertility
- * Decreases the volume of household trash to landfills
- * Lowers your household water bill

Steps to making good compost

- 1) **Purchase or build a bin:** It can be a garbage can with holes drilled into it, a plastic composting bin, a structure built with wire, wood, cement block or even old tires. It should be at least 3 feet cubed.
- 2) **Gather Materials:** Look for both “green” (high in nitrogen) and “brown” (high in carbon) materials. Both are needed for good compost. [see table below]

YES	NO
Grass Clippings	Meat, Fish and Poultry (including bones)
Yard Trimmings (old plants, wilted flowers, small prunings)	Food Scraps
Leaves	Fats, Grease, and Oils
Vegetable & Fruit Scraps	Dairy Products
Coffee Grounds	Pet Feces
Tea Leaves	Invasive Weeds
Wood Chips	Treated Wood (or any materials containing strong preservatives or toxins)
Shredded Paper (Low grade paper not acceptable for recycling)	Ashes and charcoal
N/A	Non-organics (plastic, metal, glass, etc.)

- 3) **Build your compost pile with available materials:** Add a variety of items to your compost pile. Start with a layer of leaves or straw first. After that build it in layers of “green” and “brown” materials either all at once or gradually as they become available. When you add vegetable leavings, try burying them in the pile slightly or add some soil or leaves over them to prevent smells and control flies.
- 4) **Turning:** Turn and mix the contents periodically about every 2 weeks. This introduces air, mixes old and new materials, and helps heat up the pile for more rapid decomposition.
- 5) **Moisture:** You may need to water the compost pile occasionally if the weather is dry. Your pile should feel moist, but not wet as you turn it. Water moderately, and check it again in a few days.
- 6) **Finished compost:** Compost is ready to use when it looks like humus or coarse dark soil. It may take 3-6 months in an open pile, slightly less if using a tumbler bin. The pile will shrink considerable in size over that period.
- 7) **Using compost:** Take out finished compost, and return any materials that are not fully decomposed to the bin to start a new pile. Spread your finished compost on the garden as a fertilizer, or use as mulch around your plants. It works well for either flowers or vegetables.

Common Problems

Here is a quick guide to troubleshooting the most common problems encountered in composting.

Symptom	Problem	Solution
The compost has a bad odor	Too much nitrogen (green stuff) or not enough air	Add brown material (shredded newspapers, straw, leaves, etc.) and turn the pile to aerate
The center of pile is dry or white mold appears	Not enough water	Moisten and turn
The heap is sweet smelling but will not heat up	Lack of nitrogen	Mix in nitrogen source (green stuff)
The heap is damp in middle but dry everywhere else	Pile is too small or too dry	Collect more material; moisten

References

Secrets to Great Soil - A Grower's Guide to Composting, Mulching, and Creating Healthy, Fertile Soil for Your Garden and Lawn, by Elizabeth P. Stell, 224 pages, ISBN 1-58017-009-9 (hardcover) - ISBN 1-58017-008-0 (paperback), Storey Publishing, LLC, 1998.

Let It Rot - The Gardener's Guide to Composting, 3rd edition, by Stu Campbell, 160 pages, ISBN 1-58017-023-4 (paperback), Storey Publishing, LLC, 1998