

Easy Backyard Composting

What is compost?

Compost is a dark, crumbly, earthy-smelling mixture that consists mostly of decayed organic matter. Composting is a simple, natural process, Nature's way of recycling nutrients and returning them to the soil so that they can be used again. Compost is used for fertilizing and conditioning soil. It can be made from materials that most households throw out.

What can I compost?

- Yard wastes, such as fallen leaves, grass clippings, weeds and the remains of garden plants.
- Kitchen scraps EXCEPT FOR meat, fish, bones and fatty foods (such as cheese, salad dressing and leftover cooking oil).
- Woody yard wastes, chipped or shredded, can be used as a mulch or for paths where they will eventually decompose and become compost.

By taking advantage of the natural composting process, you can help lighten the load of waste that would otherwise go to a landfill.

How do I make a compost pile?

It's easy! Follow these simple steps and in just a few hours, you'll be in business. To build a simple compost bin, you'll need:

- Small mesh wire fencing or snow fencing.
- Seven or more rough boards or stakes, depending on the shape of bin you choose. Build a square, rectangular or circular structure-your choice. For a typical home garden, a bin 3-to-4 feet in height and 5-to-8 feet square will do. Locate it away from buildings and combustible materials.

To start your compost pile:

1. Spread a layer of plant wastes 6-to-8 inches deep in the bottom of your bin. Moisten the layer thoroughly.
2. Make a second layer of high nitrogen fertilizer, such as 10-10-10. This will be a very thin layer-use ONLY about 1/2 pound or 1 cup to each 30-to-35 square feet. Moisten thoroughly.

3. Make a third layer with a few shovelful of garden soil, about 1 to 2 inches deep. This will ensure that plenty of decay organisms are present in your compost pile. Again, moisten thoroughly.

That's all there is to it!

- Repeat steps 1, 2 and 3 until you have used up your waste material. To start, your pile should have at least four or five layers of waste.
- Kitchen scraps (minus meat, fish, bones and fatty foods) should be added to the center of the waste layers where heat will be the greatest.
- Pile waste material loosely in the bin. Too much compaction inhibits the flow of air through the pile.
- It helps to make the top layer slant toward the center where it will catch rainfall. Water is the key to successful composting. A compost pile should be kept damp, but not soggy, especially during dry spells.
- Be patient! it will take six months to a year before the compost is ready for use.

Composting Do's and Don'ts

- **Do** add lime, small amounts of wood ashes or crushed eggshells to the compost pile to neutralize acids which may form and cause an odor problem.
- **Do** mix grass clippings with other wastes to loosen them up. They have a tendency to compact.
- **Do** keep compost pile damp, especially during dry spells.
- **Don't** use unfinished compost. It will rob your plants of nitrogen instead of acting as a fertilizer.
- **Don't** compost weeds that are heavily laden with seeds. Some seeds will not be killed during the heating process.
- **Don't** add meat, fish, bones or fatty food scraps to the compost mixture. They will attract animals (dogs, cats, rats, etc.) and they do not decompose readily.
- **Don't** add diseased vegetable plants to the pile if the compost will be used on a vegetable garden. The disease organisms may reappear the following year.

Community Composting

Community composting is beneficial because:

- Leaves take up too much space in landfills-many communities now ban leaves from landfills.
- Many householders do not have the time or space to compost large quantities of organic waste, such as fallen leaves.
- Composting is environmentally safer -- leaves in landfills generate dangerous gases; burning leaves creates smoke pollution and is unlawful in many communities.
- Some communities will accept leaves and other yard wastes for community compost heaps. Finished compost is usually available free to residents. Find out what's happening in your area. If no program exists, urge your community leaders to put one in place.

Why Should I Make Compost?

Composting benefits you and your community.

For you . . .

- Composting is an easy, practical way to recycle your organic yard and kitchen wastes.
- Compost is an excellent soil conditioner for even the smallest yard and garden--it's safe to use and it costs practically nothing to make.
- Compost grows healthy plants and healthy plants improve the air by removing carbon dioxide and making fresh oxygen.
- For serious gardeners, compost is an inexpensive alternative to peat and other soil improvers.

For your community . . .

- Composting could remove more than 15 percent from the solid waste stream, if everyone participated.
- Many communities now ban leaves from landfills forcing residents to find other alternatives. Some communities have started composting programs.
- Composting eliminates air pollution caused by burning leaves and other yard wastes.
- Composting recycles nutrients by returning them to the soil.