



Composting

If left alone, all organic material will eventually decompose. You may want to speed up this natural process by composting yard and kitchen trimmings in your backyard in a bin or pile. The compost you create will be a dark, crumbly, earthy mixture of decayed organic matter to use as a fertilizer or soil conditioner that will enrich your garden soil in a natural and economical way.

Compost is created by decomposing organisms such as bacteria, fungi, worms, and sow bugs. These organisms need four elements to carry out their mission: nitrogen, carbon, water, and air. Provide them a mix of “green” materials rich in nitrogen (like grass clippings and kitchen scraps) and “brown” materials rich in carbon (like dried leaves and twigs). You may need to water your pile occasionally. The mixture should be barely damp, not soggy. Turning or mixing the pile provides air and distributes moisture. More frequent turning produces faster results.

Composting is often separated into two types: cold and hot. Cold composting is a slow process that requires no maintenance. If you don't have time to tend your compost, the materials can be simply piled on the ground or in a bin and left to decay on their own. This process may take several months to over a year to break down all the organic material, but is better for suppressing soil-borne diseases. Simply add more material to the top as you accumulate it.

Hot composting is more labor intensive but produces quicker results. This process produces heat, up to 160 degrees, that can kill most weed seeds and plant diseases. To promote this process, the pile should have three parts of green material to one part of brown. Smaller pieces decompose faster so you may want to chop or shred larger items before adding them. Adding a few shovels of soil will also help get the process started, since most of the necessary organisms are already present in garden soil. The pile should be at least 3' by 3' in order to produce heat, and bigger is better. Turn it or mix it to incorporate more air and distribute moisture. Water as needed. Turn the pile at least once a week for finished compost in one to three months. Turning every two days should yield compost in less than four weeks.



Common Questions

Why should I compost?

Making compost at home has many benefits. Up to 25% of household trash can be composted and kept out of landfills. Using compost on your garden or in flower pots can reduce the need for added chemical fertilizers and pesticides keeping these out of stormwater runoff. Organic matter can loosen heavy clay soils, add essential nutrients, and improve infiltration to reduce runoff volume. Topdressing with compost reduces weeding and water use. Incorporated into sandy soil, compost increases the soil's water-holding ability. With all these benefits, why buy it when you can make your own?

Where can I get compost bins?

You do not have to use a bin to produce compost, a simple compost heap may work just as well for you. As composting becomes more popular, bins are becoming easier to find. Most large garden centers now carry them. They can also be found at specialty shops and can be ordered on-line. Visit our Web site for a full list of sources.

What does it mean if my compost pile smells bad?

Assuming you have not added meat, dairy, or fat, a bad smell can be an indication of too much moisture or too much nitrogen. If the pile smells like rotten eggs, allow the pile to dry or add dry material; it should be barely moist. If it smells like ammonia, add carbon-rich materials like dry leaves or straw to balance the nitrogen.

What if nothing is happening?

Your pile may be too dry or not contain enough nitrogen or air. Check the moisture level, if it is barely damp try adding more "green" materials like fresh yard clippings or vegetable scraps from the kitchen. Sometimes a pile with large branches and twigs will not decompose quickly; try chopping or shredding large pieces.

How can I tell when it's done?

Compost is ready to use when it is dark brown, smells earthy and is crumbly to the touch. The process can take from less than a month to a year or more.

Things to remember when composting:

- Composting can be as simple or complex as you want depending on how fast you want results, how much material you have, and the effort you want to invest.
- Do not put meat or dairy scraps or pet waste into your compost pile.
- Do add yard and kitchen waste including grass, leaves, weeds, egg shells, teabags, coffee grounds and filters, fruit & vegetable scraps, manure, and shredded paper.
- All organic material will turn to compost eventually without any help, it just may take longer. Remember, "compost happens"!



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