



How to Compost

Why Compost?

First, composting prevents plant wastes from going to the landfill, thus reducing our contribution to its volume. Second, proper composting transforms these wastes into a free soil amendment that adds nutrients, enzymes, and beneficial soil microorganisms, and improves soil texture, permeability, water retention, nutrient retention, and aeration. Finally, backyard composting is fun, and teaches children and adults about the process of decomposition and the creation of soil.

Backyard Composting Basics

Compost happens! No matter what we do or don't do, plant matter *will* decompose into one of the basic components of soil – organic matter. However, to produce the healthiest, most nutrient-rich and beneficial compost in the shortest amount of time, here are some guidelines. The basic ingredients of a healthy compost pile are **plant matter, water, air, and beneficial microorganisms**. The most successful compost is simply a nursery for microorganisms, where we create the perfect environment in which beneficial decomposing microorganisms proliferate and do their work. In fact, it is the activity of the microbes that can make a proper compost reach temperatures up to 140 to 160 degrees Fahrenheit!

1. Location: Sun, shade, or part shade – it doesn't matter. The materials may compost more slowly in full shade, but it will happen. More importantly, locate the compost where it is convenient for you to use. Make it close to the kitchen, for example, if kitchen scraps are one of the most frequently added ingredients.

2. Structure: A compost pile can be as simple as a pile of leaves, or as complex as a three-bin system. The goal is to allow air to circulate as much as possible into the pile, and to make the pile as tall as possible. It is better to make the pile taller than wider. You may purchase a specially made compost bin or you may build your own structure from new or recycled materials. Some materials that can be used are chicken wire or other woven wire, old wooden pallets, or cinder blocks, with holes laid horizontally for better aeration of the compost.

3. Ingredients: Whatever system is used, the next step is to combine ingredients in the best ratio.

a. Recommended: Vegetative kitchen scraps, eggshells, coffee grounds, tea bags, hair, grass clippings, leaves, manure, young non-aggressive weeds, organic hay, small amounts of garden soil, and shredded newspaper (soy-based inks only).

b. Not recommended: Aggressive weeds, such as Bermuda grass, Johnson grass, or nut grass; contaminated wastes, such as sawdust from treated lumber or anything with pesticide residue (such as most hay); human or dog or cat feces; meat scraps; or fatty materials.

c. Ratio: Your choice of a compost recipe can be scientific or haphazard. According to Rodale Research Institute, you want to build a compost with a C/N (carbon/nitrogen) ratio of about 25:1. In other words, mix a large amount of brown, dry (carbonaceous) material (such as brown, dried leaves or dried grass clippings) with a small amount of green or moist (nitrogenous) material (such as kitchen scraps or fresh grass clippings). Don't worry too much about the exact ratio. Experiment and have fun!

4. Moisture: The compost pile should be about as moist as a wrung-out sponge. Therefore, in dry spells, in the summer heat, or if you see a white mold, the pile may need to be watered more often. If the compost gets too soggy, add more dry, brown stuff and turn it. In general, water the pile about once a week.

5. Aeration: The most beneficial microorganisms for gardening are bred in the presence of oxygen. In addition, *anaerobic* organisms (the ones that live *without* oxygen) are associated with foul odors. Therefore, it is a good idea to keep a compost pile well aerated. In simple compost piles and open bins a pitchfork is the best tool for turning. In completely closed bins, a compost-aerating tool is needed. For best results, aerate the compost pile about once a week.

Happy Composting!

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