BACKYARD COMPOSTING INFORMATION

Presented by



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WHAT IS COMPOST?

Composting is nature's process of recycling decomposed organic materials into a rich soil known as compost. Finished compost looks like soil-dark brown, crumbly and smells like forest floor. It is rich in nutrients and makes for a good soil amendment and assists in water retention.

HOW DO YOU MAKE IT?

Compost needs four things; moisture, oxygen, temperature, and a good mixture of "materials." The ideal mix is 50-70% "brown" carbon-rich materials and 30-50% "green" nitrogen-rich scraps by volume. Or if creating compost by weight, then a 50/50 mix of browns and greens will work. For example every pound of kitchen scraps (greens), it's good to have a pound of leaves (browns).

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TO BIN OR NOT TO BIN?

Many compost bins are designed to maximize air flow and circulation. This is because oxygen keeps away the “stinky” anaerobic microbes that can otherwise create odors.

Keeping compost well mixed and aerated prevents those anaerobic bacteria from getting established. Oxygen is fuel for the aerobic microbes that break down organic material into finished compost - give them plenty of oxygen and they’ll work quickly.

There are tumbling compost bins that help aerate their contents, or you may want to use a compost turning tool like a pitchfork or a specialized compost turning tool.

Building your own bin can save money, remember the ideal size is at least 3’x3’x3’ to ensure thorough heat to break down organic materials.

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COMPOST TROUBLESHOOTING

	SYMPTOM	CAUSE	SOLUTION
PROBLEM: Compost pile does not heat up	Too Wet	Compost materials are soggy: there is not enough air	Turn the pile, adding dry absorbent material (BROWN-carbon)
	Too Dry	Not enough moisture	Moisten the pile without saturating it: use a spray nozzle Should have the consistency of a damp wrung-out sponge
	Pile is moist but isn't deccomposing; or it is only damp and warm in the center	Too much carbon (brown) material, not enough nitrogen (green) matter	Turn pile, adding nitrogen-rich materials such as manure, grass clippings, fresh leaves, vegetable or fruit wastes Consider adding an activator
PROBLEM: Odor	Ammonia Smell	Too much nitrogen (GREEN matter) in pile (possibly too many grass clippings) Or pile is too alkaline (possibly too much limestone, or ash and poplar/cottonwood tree leaves added to pile)	If nitrogen problem: Turn pile and add more BROWN material (carbon) If alkaline related: Turn pile and add acid material like sawdust, oak leaves, vegetable scraps
	Putrid smell (like rotten eggs)	Pile is too wet: not enough oxygen (is putrefying, not decomposing!)	Turn pile to aerate it and add dry carbon (BROWN) materials to absorb excessive moisture
PROBLEM: Pests (rodents, fruit flies, ants, gnats, raccoons, scavengers, etc.)	Rodents & raccoons, scavengers, and perhaps maggots	These are attracted to meat and fatty food scraps like cheese and other dairy products	Remove meat/fatty foods from bin Turn pile to increase temperature Balance carbon to nitrogen ratio Use rodent proof bin: keep lid on, put 1/4-inch wire mesh on bottom or sides and insure air venting holes are less than 1/2-inch in diameter
	Flies, fruit flies, gnats, etc.	These are attracted to uncovered wastes, especially fruits, melons, and vegetables	Don't leave exposed! Mix or cover with carbon (brown) materials, finished compost or some soil
	Ants	Pile is too dry or has too much BROWN material	Turn the pile while moistening it with a spray nozzle. The ants will leave soon

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COMPOST RECIPE

50-70% browns (leaves, hay, dry matter). The “browns are the carbohydrate or energy foods for the compost organisms. By providing the browns, the micro-organisms get the energy for their work.

30-50% greens (grass, garbage, manure). The “greens” are the fresh, damp materials that decompose rapidly on their own. They contain nitrogen compounds that are important in allowing the population of micro-organisms to grow. Nitrogen is the key element in protien which is needed to make the tissue for most animals. The greens are also the source of most bad smells related to composting. They should be mixed completely or at least in layers with drier brown materials. Too much green material can collapse in volume and lose it’s air, and spoil.

0-5% dirt/old compost. These are the inoculants; the yeast in the bread, that starts the process. Rich soil or compost has innumerable soil organisms. While not absolutely necessary, the dirt/old compost speeds the process.

Water (damp sponge consistency). This is very important to have adequate moisture inside the compost pile. The vast majority of problem piles are too dry. Water the pile as you build it, not from the top at the end. Leaves are like shingles and should be stirred and sprayed to ensure that they get wet. If you do nothing else, moisten the pile. The pile may also need covering during rainy periods to avoid water logging and losing air.

Air (bin with open sides, turning). Oxygen is required for this “slow fire” process we call composting. Without it, biological activity will be severely limited and a shift to putrefying bacteria may occur. This occurs most often when too much fresh green matter or garbage is added and not mixed in well.

Mix ingredients together and turn as you can. If pile is cool, and not yet finished compost, it needs to be turned.

10 GOOD REASONS TO BACKYARD COMPOST:

1. Yard and food waste make up 30% of the food waste stream. Composting your kitchen scraps and yard trimmings helps divert that waste from the landfill, waterways and water treatment facilities.
2. You will significantly reduce pest problems and your use of pesticides. Healthy plants from healthy soil look better, produce better and have a much greater ability to fight off pests and diseases.
3. Adding compost to the soil improves moisture retention.
4. Adding decomposed organic material to the soil feeds beneficial organisms.
5. Compost amends both sandy and clay soils.
6. Compost provides a balanced, slow-release source of nutrients that helps the soil hold nutrients long enough for plants to use them.
7. Composting saves money! Avoiding the cost of buying soil conditioners, bagged manure etc.
8. Feeding your plants well will improve their own diet.
9. Plants grown in depleted soils have a reduced nutrient content.
10. Home composting is a valuable tool in educating children about nature and the cycle of life.

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