



Composting



For those who find the old fashioned, do-it-yourself composting bin unsightly or feel it will attract nuisance wildlife, there are numerous commercial receptacles available.

When you compost lawn and garden or food waste from your property, the result is dark, nutrient-rich humus that can be used to improve your soil. Composting is an easy, economical way to reduce solid waste and improve the health of your lawn, landscape plants, or garden.

What is Composting?

Composting is a natural phenomenon taking place all around us, all the time. Look into neighboring woods, meadows, desert, or other natural areas—when plants or animals die, they slowly decompose into organic components that help build new soil. But these once living things don't just decompose on their own; they have a lot of help from bacteria, fungi, insects, and other creatures that thrive on organic waste.

When you compost yard or food waste, you are essentially harnessing and managing the natural process of composting to benefit your landscape or garden. Composting is not difficult or labor intensive. Your job is to simply provide the structure and conditions that will allow nature to do the work.

Compost systems range in size from small, home-built bins to industrial systems capable of handling hundreds of tons of municipal waste daily. Members from Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary backyards, schools, golf courses, cemeteries, and farms are all successfully composting—and you can too.

Why Compost?

Composting can *significantly* cut down on the amount of waste you send to your local landfill or incinerator, especially if you compost both food and yard waste. But equally important, compost can be used to fertilize and condition your soil—and soil health is at the root of all living things.

As a soil amendment, compost improves the physical condition of soil. It makes clay soils easier to work, improves aeration, root penetration, and water infiltration. Compost also helps sandy soils retain water and nutrients. Compost can be used to mulch or top dress planted areas, to amend soil prior to planting, or as a component in potting mixes.

Finally, composting may save you money. Reduced waste may decrease garbage tipping and hauling fees, as well as reduce the need to purchase commercial soil amendments or mulches.

What *Not* to Compost

Since most things can be composted, it's easier to remember the things that shouldn't be included in your composting operation. These include:

- Meat and fish scraps and bones
- Fatty foods, such as salad dressing and leftover cooking oil
- Barbecue ashes and coal
- Woody plant material
- Pet waste

What materials can be composted?

Anything of living origin can be composted, but the quality and quantity of the materials you use will affect the composting process and finished product. You can compost yard waste such as leaves, grass clippings, weeds, and the remains of garden plants as well as kitchen waste including food scraps, coffee grounds, and eggshells.

Getting Started

1. **Get set up.** Your first step is to build or buy a composting structure to hold your composting wastes. Your enclosure can be made of wood slat fencing, cement blocks, bricks, scrap lumber, or woven wire. For a typical home garden, a 3 x 3 x 3-foot pile is ideal. Some composting systems include 3 bins to facilitate turning, sorting, and separating the finished compost. All bins should allow for air circulation. Use small, 16-20 gauge wire mesh on the ground and around the pile to keep rodents and other animals out.
2. **Choose a location.** Pick an out-of-the way spot if aesthetics is a concern, but be sure the site is easily accessible with a wheelbarrow (or loader for larger sites).
3. **Build your pile.** When starting a new pile, most people build up several layers of materials, but once you start turning and sorting your pile, the layers blend together. Eventually, you'll simply manage your pile by the art, science, and guesswork inherent in successful composting. Keep in mind that there's very little that can go wrong that can't be fixed.

To begin, spread a layer of plant wastes 6-to-8 inches deep in the bottom of your bin. Moisten the layer thoroughly. Then add some garden fertilizer such as a 12-12-12, about a cup for each 25 square feet of top surface area. Make a second layer of soil or sod 1-to-2 inches thick. The soil contains microorganisms that help to start the decomposition process. Add food waste to the middle of the pile and cover it with a layer of leaves or grass clippings. Then continue to alternate layers of organic materials, fertilizer or manure, and soil, and water each layer, until you've reached your maximum height.

4. **Manage your pile.** Depending on how quickly you want to use the compost you generate and how much time and effort you want to devote, you can maximize your pile, or do just enough to keep it going. Every pile needs to be turned occasionally to increase air circulation and watered to add moisture if it's too dry. Use a pitchfork to turn the pile, add new material, and remove finished compost.

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