Composting Simplified



Article

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Discover how to make nutrient-rich soil for free with natural materials you have around your garden.

QUICK START GUIDE (DETAILED INSTRUCTIONS BELOW)

1. Collect organic materials such as grass clippings, leaves, plant residue, straw, or cover crops.
2. Layer the materials in a pile, alternating green and brown types.
3. Maintain adequate moisture by watering or covering with a tarp.
4. Monitor your pile and turn as needed.

WHAT IS COMPOST?

Organic gardening is all about feeding the soil to grow healthy plants, and the best food for your soil is compost. Adding compost to your garden soil provides nutrients for your plants, improves the structure of your soil, and helps it retain water. And the great news is that you can make it yourself for free with natural materials you have around your yard and garden.

Compost is a rich, earthy material created by the natural decomposition action of soil dwelling bacteria, fungi, earthworms and insects. You can make compost out of natural materials like leaves, grass clippings, food scraps, and the weeds that you pull out of your garden. By keeping these materials on-site instead of throwing them away, you help keep natures nutrient cycle going and ensure a steady harvest of healthy food.

BUILDING THE PILE:

You need four basic things to make good compost: moist green material; dry brown material; air; and water.

• Start your compost pile with a coarse layer of small sticks or other rough material. This will let air circulate at the bottom of the pile. The minimum size for an effective compost pile is 3 x 3 x 3 feet, so make the bottom layer at least that big to get you started.

• Build your pile by alternating layers of green and brown material. Whatever you have on hand is perfect!
• Green materials provide nitrogen to your pile and can include grass clippings, food scraps, rotten vegetables, weeds, or uprooted plants from the garden. Animal manures like horse or cow manure are also considered green because of their high nitrogen content.
• Brown materials provide carbon and can include dry leaves, straw, corn stalks, or other dried plant material from the garden. If your weeds have dried up and are more brown than green, they go in the dry layer.
• Avoid putting meat or dairy in your pile because it attracts critters and takes a long time to break down.
• Ideally, you want to build a pile that has 1 part green to 3 parts brown materials. But don’t worry too much about exact proportions — simply alternating the layers usually works out fine.
• Sprinkle the dry layers with a little bit of water to keep things moist, but don’t drown it.
• The top layer should be dry material to insulate the pile and keep it moist.

TURNING THE PILE:

Once you have built your layer cake for the microbes, your pile will go through hot and cold phases and gradually shrink in size.

The hot phase is the most active, and temperatures in the pile can reach 130˚–140˚F which kills most weed seeds as well as soil pathogens. A few days after you build your pile, dig into the center and feel the heat. This heat is created by the digestive activity of the microbes. This hot phase usually lasts about 4–7 days before beginning to cool down.

If you want compost fast, turn your pile after 10 days to introduce more air and kick off another hot phase. Do this a couple of times and you can have ready-to-use compost in 6–8 weeks!

Once the pile has cycled through a few hot phases, it cools down and the earthworms and soil insects move in to finish the work. You can tell that your compost is ready to use when you can no longer recognize any of the original materials. It should look like light, crumbly soil, and smell rich and earthy.

TROUBLESHOOTING:

Each time you turn your pile you will notice the original materials you put in the pile breaking down. You can troubleshoot your pile easily at this time.

• If the materials are too dry and not breaking down, you need to add more water.
• If there is a bad smell, it might mean the pile is too wet. Add more dry material, or just mix the dry and wet layers better.

CONTAINERS AND BINS:

You can follow the same basic instructions described above to make compost in bins or other containers. You can make your bins out of recycled pallets, chicken wire, concrete

blocks, or hay bales. Each bin must be at least 3x3x3 feet to hold enough material for the decomposition process to be effective.

One of the most widely used is the classic three-bin system. This system is perfect for larger yards and gardens, and makes it easy to have a constant supply of compost to add to your garden. When you fill up one bin with enough material, you leave that one alone and start filling the next bin, and so on. By the time you have filled your third bin, the first bin will be ready to use.

If you don’t have enough space for a three-bin system, and don’t want to make your own bin, there are several different commercial products available to contain your compost pile. Our Rugged Composter bin is great for small yards, keeps the materials contained, out of sight, and out of the reach of most critters. This is a great system to use to make compost slowly over time for those people who don’t want to put in much effort.

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