

Composting Basics

Composting Options

Lots of options available, depending on how much work you're willing to do, how much waste you generate, and how much space you have to devote to composting. Start by asking yourself:

1. What materials do I have to compost?
2. What volume of materials do I generate (weekly, seasonally)?
3. How much time and effort am I willing to dedicate to composting?
4. How much yard space, if any, do I have available for a composting system?

Your answers will help determine the system that is right for you.

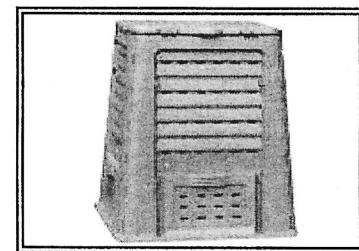
Aerobic composting systems – requires regular turning and mixing of materials in order to insure that air and moisture levels are maintained. Results in much quicker decomposition and finished compost.

Anaerobic composting systems – a ‘closed system’ that requires little maintenance outside of adding materials periodically. Decomposition takes much longer.

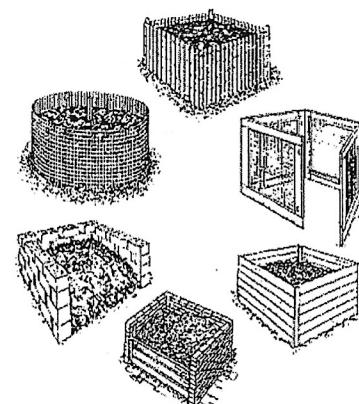
Vermiculture – use of worms to compost modest amounts of material. Can be done indoors, allowing year-round composting. Does involve some maintenance to maintain proper moisture levels and feeding of the worms.

Purchased vs. Home-made

Most of the commercially available compost bins and tumblers are designed for aerobic composting, since they allow easy manipulation and turning of the materials. These are an attractive option for those with little yard space or who are worried about offending the neighbors. Only disadvantage is that they often have smaller capacities and can handle limited amounts of waste.



Larger bins, while taking up more space, allow one to compost virtually ALL of your yard and kitchen waste. One or more bins can be easily constructed with wire fencing, cinder blocks, or wood pallets. More complicated multi-bin systems for the serious composter are fairly simple construction projects and can provide you with a way to store materials and have piles in various stages of decomposition.



Placement

The ideal location for your compost bin is where you can easily access it, both to add materials and remove the finished compost. In general though, you want to choose a site that is level and has good drainage. Also avoid constant exposure to the sun and wind (which can result in excessive drying of the materials) or total sheltering from sun and wind (which may result in the materials staying too moist).

What can you compost?

Ingredients in a successful compost pile can be classified into basic categories such as DRY, MOIST, and ACTIVATOR or more simply as BROWN, GREEN, and BLACK. Commonly used DRY/BROWN ingredients include:

- Autumn leaves
- Straw
- Dried grass clippings
- Shredded newspaper (minus the glossy ad pages, which contain toxic inks)
- Pet or human hair
- Mulches or finely chipped branches

Commonly used MOIST/GREEN ingredients include:

- Fresh grass clippings (don't use if lawn chemicals sprayed recently)
- Yard and garden weeds
- Fruit and vegetable scraps from the kitchen
- Coffee grounds & filters/tea bags
- Crushed eggshells

Commonly used ACTIVATOR/BLACK ingredients include:

- Finished compost
- Manure
- Garden topsoil

The following items can be added in smaller quantities:

- Untreated paper towels or tissues
- Wood ashes
- Sawdust/wood shavings

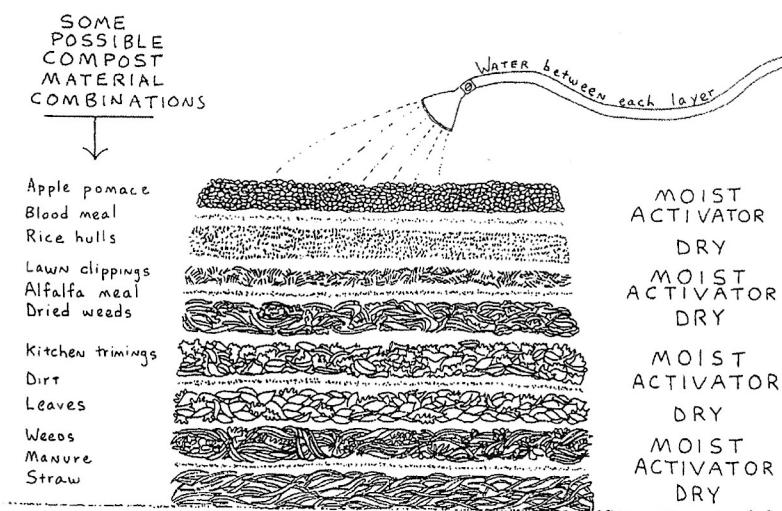
The following items should NOT be added to compost piles:

- Meat or bones
- Dairy products
- Animal fat or oils
- Pet or human waste
- Charcoal briquette ashes

In simple terms, if you think of leaves as brown/dry ingredients and grass clippings as green/moist ingredients, your pile should have a mixture of these approximating 3 parts dry to 2 parts moist. This balances carbon-rich materials with nitrogen-rich materials.

The Lasagna Method

The best way to build an efficient aerobic compost pile is to layer different materials, much as you layer the ingredients in lasagna. Since some ingredients are more plentiful at some times of the year and scarce at others (i.e. grass clippings in summer vs. dry leaves in autumn), it can be useful to stockpile ingredients next to your compost pile so that as you add a layer of kitchen waste you can then add a layer of grass clippings, leaves, topsoil, etc.



Don't forget the water!

Compost piles should be moist but not sodden – like a wrung-out sponge. If most of the materials being added are on the dry side, the materials should be wetted with a hose. During hot dry weather, the pile may need a sprinkling of water once a week or so to maintain proper moisture levels.

Solutions to Common Problems

Bad odor – too much moisture; turn pile to aerate and add additional dry material

Ammonia odor – too much nitrogen from excessive green material (like grass clippings); turn pile and add brown material such as straw or leaves

Pile is too hot (+140°) – pile is too large and/or there is insufficient ventilation; reduce size of pile and/or turn materials

Rats, mice, raccoons present – often attracted to meat scraps or fatty food waste; make sure these are not being added to pile; turn pile to insure that vegetable scraps are buried

Flies or bees present – unless this is accompanied by an unpleasant odor (see above) there is nothing wrong; pile can be turned to insure that fruit scraps are buried

Ants present – pile is too dry; water thoroughly and pack down if necessary

When is Compost Done?

When the bottom layers of your pile are dark, crumbly, and possess a rich soil-like aroma, this compost is ready to use.

Uses

Vegetable or flower gardens – can be used as a top dressing anytime of year or worked into soil in early spring or fall.

Lawns – spread finely sifted compost in a thin, even layer before watering or rainfall.

Shrubs, hedges & trees – scatter compost at the drip lines (underneath outermost branches) where most feeder roots are; don't pile against the trunk.

House plants – a few tablespoons of compost can be steeped in hot water and after cooling, the 'compost tea' serves as a mild fertilizer. Compost can also be used along with potting soil for potted plants and as a mulch for already potted plants.