

COMPOSTING GUIDE

WHAT TO COMPOST:

Mix **GREENS**, materials with a low carbon to nitrogen ratio, & **BROWNS** with a higher ratio. Greens have carbon to nitrogen ratios around 15-25 parts carbon to 1 part nitrogen. Browns are high with 50-300 parts carbon to nitrogen. The ideal composting mix is 30 parts carbon to 1 part nitrogen. Fortunately, by mixing in food materials with soiled paper products listed below, your mix should be almost ideal.

As long as you are composting a variety of materials, don't worry too much about the mix. **EVERYTHING EVENTUALLY BREAKS DOWN INTO COMPOST.**

Greens: vegetables, fruits, grains, coffee grounds with filter, tea bags, nut shells, green plant cuttings, annual weeds (no seeds), hedge trimmings, grass clippings (best to leave mowed grass in place to fertilize your lawn). Also natural fibers such as cotton pads/swabs, cat, dog & even human hair, worn natural cotton, wool, & leather cloths (cut into small pieces – no polyester).

Browns: eggshells, wood chips, branches (modest size), straw, leaves (small amount in bin - most mowed into lawn as detailed below), pine needles. Also **soiled paper products** such as paper towels, napkins, tissue paper, compostable paper plates or cups (no coatings)

If you want the materials to compost faster, cut, shred, or tear them into smaller pieces. But don't worry about it too much. Everything will compost over time.

You can also add manure, bonemeal, old potting soil or other ingredients to help increase the fertilizer quality of your compost. (Compost is considered a soil amendment, not a fertilizer.)

You can also add materials like partly decayed leaves, humus/soil, etc., from your yard. Bacteria from the materials will activate

the composting process in your pile. Also add local worms found in your yard. The castings from these effective composters are great for your garden. Move the worms to your garden with your compost and they'll continue to improve your garden for years to come.

(Worms you can purchase are recommended for indoor bins — vermi-composting — not outdoor use.) Try to keep the pile moist as a wrung out sponge. Add water when needed.

WHAT NOT TO COMPOST:

Do not compost: meat/fish, bones, oils & fats, dairy products, pet/human feces or pet litter, whole eggs, inorganic wastes (plastic, metals, etc.), chemicals/paints, etc. If you're not sure don't compost it.

The organic materials technically could be composted, but for residential composting the concerns are that these materials produce odors, which then draws pests. Also they can potentially breed harmful bacteria that could infect you when you spread the compost or eat food grown in it.

WHERE TO PUT THE BIN:

You can put the bin anywhere, but some questions to consider are: Do you want it close to the house for easy access? Do you want the bin hidden away so you and your neighbors don't see it? Place it in the sun or not (sun increases composting, but materials compost fine in shade too)? It's all up to your preference. However, you want to have soil underneath the bin so bacteria and worms present have direct access to the compostable materials.

HOW & WHEN TO TURN COMPOST:

Turning over the materials in the bin helps to accelerate the composting process by aerating the pile. The bacteria, actinomycetes, mold, fungi, nematodes, protozoa, rotifers, earthworms, and a variety of other organisms and bugs that compost the materials, need air to work effectively. You can partially turn the materials in the bin with a fork or a compost turner made for this purpose.

To turn all the contents, lift the bin off the pile and place it next to the pile. Then spade or shovel the materials back into the bin. This can be done as often or as little as you like depending on if you want the materials to compost faster. Once a week is the extreme, but every one to three months is a reasonable timeframe. You don't have to turn your compost. Some people have gone years without ever turning the materials and have great compost at the bottom of their bin. It's really up to you. Everything composts eventually no matter what you do.

WHAT TO DO IF MY COMPOST SMELLS:

Compost should smell pleasant like humus in the woods. If your bin has a bad odor, it is likely that the pile is too wet and doesn't have enough aeration (or you added items you shouldn't have - see above). To solve this issue, lift the bin off the pile and place it next to the pile. Spade or shovel the composting material back into the bin. This will aerate the materials. If the pile is very wet or slimy, mix in leaves or cardboard to absorb the moisture and make space between the materials for aeration. The odor should dissipate fairly quickly.

WHEN WILL MY COMPOST BE READY:

How long it takes for materials to compost varies widely based on what materials are going in, sun on the bin, turning the compost regularly to aerate it, & keeping the pile moist like a wrung out sponge so bacteria can continue to work. Generally, it takes 6 months to a year.

Fortunately, materials will compost no matter what you do. It may just take a bit longer. You can invest as much or as little effort as you feel like in turning your pile or watering. It's all OK. Either way you are taking materials out of the waste stream, which saves money on tipping fees and extends the life of our landfills. It also reduces methane from landfills. Methane is a greenhouse gas 40 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

HOW DO I FINISH THE COMPOST OFF and/or HOW DO I ACCESS MY COMPOST:

This topic comes up regularly. At some point you have to let the composting process finish before you can use it. But how to do that when you have more materials to add? You start another pile.

Lift the bin off the compost pile and place it next to it. Take the top layers of the most recent materials and spade or shovel the materials back into the bin (go down to the point where most of the material is dark or black). Leave the remainder of the pile to finish composting. Since it will be mostly composted, pests should not be a problem even though the bin no longer protects the materials. Within one to three months the pile should be ready to use. Continue to add new materials to the bin for your next batch of compost.

The other easy option is just keep adding to the bin and you take some compost out of the bottom through the sliding door. You won't have as much at a time, but this may still work for you.

WHERE TO USE COMPOST:

Dig compost into your vegetable or flower garden to amend the soil. Compost improves soil quality, increases water retention and adds nutrients. Compost can be used as mulch under bushes and trees. Thin amounts can be spread on lawns to add nutrients and as mulch.

Compost is considered a soil amendment. It has modest fertilizing qualities depending on what was composted and if you added fertilizing compounds to it (see above). The bacteria in compost also helps plants absorb the nutrients they need from the soil, thus promoting plant growth. You may still want to use fertilizers, whether all natural sources or products like Miracle Grow, to help your flowers and/or vegetables flourish.

LEAF COMPOSTING MADE EASY

Of course you can put some of your leaves in your compost bin with your food waste, but most of us have too many leaves to fit in the bin. We end up either bagging the leaves or raking them to the curb for pickup.

An easier way that takes less energy and time than raking and bagging is to just mow the leaves into your lawn. Grass and leaves when cut together make a perfect combination that composts quickly right into your lawn. This provides nutrients promoting lawn growth in the spring and acts as mulch to help keep moisture in the soil.

If you have a modest amount of leaves (you can see the grass through the leaves), you can use your mulching lawn mower to cut the leaves and grass together and just let them compost into the lawn.

If you have a medium amount of leaves (2-3 inches), you can mow as above a couple times over a 2-3 week period as the leaves are falling before they get too deep.

If you have a large volume of leaves (3-5 inches), you can use your mower with the side chute open. Start in the middle of your lawn and mow out toward the edges with the leaves being blown toward the edges of your yard. As you mow the leaves several times, as they are being blown toward the edges, the pieces get smaller and smaller. Some will stay on the lawn and compost in place with the grass. The rest will make a small pile along the whole edge of your yard that will compost by early spring. It can be left in place or used in your garden or as mulch under bushes. This keeps all the leaf nutrients in your yard.

One last option is to make a pile of leaves in a corner of your yard. Use your lawn mower to cut the leaves into small pieces that will compost faster. To increase the speed of composting the leaves sprinkle/mix urea, fertilizer, or other high nitrogen compound into the pile. This will activate the pile with leaves composted by mid-spring.

If you have huge volumes of leaves, you can try a combination of these approaches, but you may end up needing to bag some of the leaves or rake them to the curb for municipal pickup.

DON'T DISPOSE OF FOOD IN THE GARBAGE DISPOSAL

Many of us thought we were supposed to dispose of food down the garbage disposal. We never really thought about how it increased the volume of solid waste in the sewage.

Water authorities must strain all the food wastes put down the disposal (plus other solid waste) from the water before it goes through the rest of the wastewater treatment cycle. After straining, the solid waste must be processed. The added volume of food waste makes the straining and processing take longer and cost more money. It is much more cost effective and beneficial to compost your food waste in your compost bin.