

Do It Yourself Composting

<p>Why compost?</p>	<p>Did you know that organic materials thrown out in the trash actually slow the breakdown of other non-organic garbage in the landfill? It's true, but home composting is not only good for the earth it's the equivalent of a B12 injection for your garden, orchard, lawn, or flowerbed.</p> <p>Plants need food, good food, and that's what compost offers them. Compost is a natural, organic fertilizer made from things you are probably just throwing away. Plants grown with compost as part of healthy soil structure are stronger, more productive and less susceptible to diseases and pests.</p> <p>So, start composting, grow healthier plants, and save money on fertilizers by giving your plants a healthy diet of nutrient rich homemade compost food! Getting started is easy and doesn't require a big investment of time or money!</p>
<p>How does composting work?</p>	<p>Finished compost is the end product of raw organic materials that have been decomposed by chemical and microbial processes. There are many books on the market that describe the technical aspects of the actions and changes that take place, but in a nutshell, bacteria, fungi, protozoa, millipedes, centipedes, sow bugs, snails, slugs, spiders, beetles, ants, and especially, earthworms work their magic to transform your organic trash into garden gold.</p> <p>There are many variations in composting techniques, but the basic idea is to provide ideal conditions for the natural chemical and microbial breakdown to take place. This is typically done in the form of "hot" or "cold" compost piles with good aeration, dampness, and generous amounts of organic materials piled 4 feet high.</p>
<p>Hot vs. Cold Composting</p>	<p>Hot composting is quicker, but requires more day-to-day attention and more raw materials up front. In hot composting, the pile must be 4 feet tall at the onset so that the pile will heat in the sun to 150 degrees (in the center). This encourages the biological action of bacteria and fungi, killing weed seeds and disease organisms. In most conditions, a 4 foot high hot compost pile will be ready in approximately 1 month, however, the pile must be kept damp (not wet) at all times, and it must be "turned" several times per week. Turning is the process of moving the materials in the compost pile, generally with a pitch fork. In hot composting you need to regularly move the hot center materials to the outside, and the cooler outside materials to the interior for even decomposition.</p> <p>Cold composting is slower, but less labor intensive and can be built over time. This tends to be the better method for smaller gardens, urban settings and/or those with less time/energy to dedicate. In cold compost piles instead of using heat you let the worms do all of the work. Cold compost piles must still be exposed to the sun, kept damp, and be fed with organic materials, but are much more forgiving since they do not need to</p>

	<p>be turned regularly. They do require more patience as it can take 2-6 months for a cold pile to produce good compost.</p>
<p>How much room do I need to compost?</p>	<p>You will need a place for a composting bin – this could be as large as a 4' x 4' area (recommended if you have a lot of yard or garden wastes such as cut grass or spent plants) or as small as a 1' x 1' area if you're just going to use it for kitchen scraps.</p> <p>The golden rule is to size your compost bin so that you can keep it half full at all times (cold composting) or completely full once a month if hot composting. Don't make it so big that you can't meet these requirements, or so small that you overfill it. Decide on what works best for you and your space.</p>
<p>Does it smell? Will it attract pests?</p>	<p>The key to an "invisible" compost pile is to add only the right organic materials (described below) and to establish it in a convenient location, not too close to your garden, but close to the area where you'll be getting all that organic material.</p> <p>It can be closer to your back door than you might think– if done right compost is odor-free and pest-free ("good" bugs will live in your compost bin if it's healthy – but they'd rather eat the nutrient rich foods you're giving them than go through the trouble of bothering you and your home).</p>
<p>What can I compost?</p>	<p>You can compost almost anything that is biodegradable including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kitchen vegetable scraps (potato skins, old lettuce, etc.) • Garden scraps (dead plants, old mulch, spoiled veggies, etc.) • Egg shells • Leftover plain pastas or rice • Moldy & stale bread • Weeds, wilted flowers & cut grass • Old mulch, straw & leaves • Coffee grounds and coffee filters • Lint from the dryer • Dust & pet hair from the vacuum cleaner • Paper towels & napkins • Shredded newspaper, bills & junk mail (non-dyed paper only) • Animal manure (only vegetarian animals like rabbits, hamsters, horses, cows & goats. <u>No</u> dog or cat or people byproducts) <p>The list of things you should not compost is shorter and easier to remember:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No oils or greases (salad dressing, bacon drippings, etc.) • No meat • No sauces (marinara, alfredo, gravy, etc.) • No garden plants or flowers that have been infected by a virus (most composting books will tell you that the heat of a hot compost pile will destroy viruses, but unless you are absolutely sure your pile is getting up to 150 degrees it is better to err on the side of caution)

<p>How do I compost?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Select and place your composting bin (some DIY instructions to build your own below) in a desirable location 2. Collect materials (remember, if you choose hot composting you will need enough organic material to build it up 4' all at once). For kitchen scraps, use a small container with a lid to conveniently collect them as you go (organic breakdown will start immediately in the container and you can just empty it every few days into a cold pile rather than having to do it daily) 3. Layer the materials: green then brown. Examples of green materials include kitchen scraps, weeds, fresh cut grass, etc. Examples of brown materials include fallen leaves, old mulch, straw, dried cut grass, coffee grounds, etc. 4. Fill the container 5. Keep it moist at all times (if it is too dry you will notice ants moving in; if it is too wet it will look rotten). Normally, average rainfall will suffice, but during dry periods you may need to add a gallon of water to the material (small pile) or spray with a hose (large pile) 6. Turn the pile at least weekly (required for hot method, but can be done less often with cold piles if you need additional aeration or have recently added a large amount of new material to an old pile) 7. Reap the benefits! Finished compost can be immediately added as a fertilizer to lawns, flowerbeds, gardens and orchards without the threat of over-feeding or burning.
<p>How do I build a simple and inexpensive composting bin?</p>	<p>You can find manufactured bins in a wide variety of sizes, shapes, colors and styles to suit your space and lifestyle at your favorite retailer, farm/garden supply store, or in many popular gardening catalogs. Prices vary greatly, but for the average do-it-yourselfer here are 3 easy-to-construct and inexpensive weekend project designs:</p> <p>Wire Mesh Cylinder: Simplest to construct! Using 4' high heavy gauge welded wire (available at most home improvement retailers & farm supply stores) form a circle at least 1' in diameter, but up to 4'. Secure the wire to stakes driven into the ground for support. Often this style is used for autumn leaves, but it can be used for any composting project.</p> <p>Sunken Garbage Can: Convenient for small or urban spaces to keep the compost bin out of sight in a limited area. Purchase a plastic or galvanized metal garbage can. Punch or drill holes in the bottom of the can for drainage. Bury it in the ground (at least 1 foot, but you can also bury it up to the lid for an even lower profile). Insert a perforated drain pipe (PVC) or a wire mesh cylinder in the center of the can for aeration (do not put organic matter in that area). Place a lid or small mesh screen on top to keep out scavengers.</p> <p>Screened Square Compost Bin: Easy access and ideal for hot composting, but requires more space and carpentry skills. Build four 4' x 4' squares out of 1" x 2" lumber pieces and staple chicken wire to the outside. Join two squares together to create an L (90 degree angle). Then join two L's together with hooks and eyes, or latches, to form a square. When the compost is ready to use, unfasten the hooks for quick shoveling access.</p>

	<p>Multi-Bin System: Best for hot composting. This system will keep you in compost all year long, but requires a 4' wide x 12' long space and a lot of organic material. Build the screened square compost bin described above. Then repeat by building the same bin only 3' tall instead of 4' and place to the right of the original bin. Finally, repeat the process, building a 2' tall bin to the right of the last bin. This gives you three decreasing sizes of containers, and the ability to turn your pile into each successively smaller bin as it decomposes, while allowing you to start a new compost pile in the largest bin every few weeks.</p>
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