



Why Compost?

Composting is a great way to enhance your garden while also reducing the waste that would otherwise end up in our landfills. There are many different ways to compost your food and yard wastes.

Composting happens naturally all around us. For example, leaves fall off trees and are layered with organic material on the forest floor, to be gradually decomposed by soil organisms, like earthworms and bacteria, into nutrient rich soil.

Without active composting, it can take 500 years to create an inch of top-soil. Composting speeds this process by creating habitat for all of the microorganisms that make decomposition possible. Worms and insects chew the material so that it is small enough for microorganisms to eat. Then, bacteria and fungus process the leftovers. A well-maintained compost pile creates the perfect setting for these interactions. When you compost vegetable scraps and yard clippings, you are feeding the soil food web which, in turn, makes nutrients available to plants.

A Balance of Carbon and Nitrogen

Each time you add material to the compost pile you add lots of carbon and some nitrogen. Carbon and nitrogen are the basic building blocks of organic matter. Think of the *green materials* (such as grasses, fruits, and vegetables) as nitrogen rich, and the *brown materials* (such as leaves and woodchips) as carbon rich.

As you add materials to your pile try to balance each green material with 2 or 3 times as much brown material (see the chart to the right).

For example, for every 5-gallon bucket of food

waste add three 5-gallon buckets full of dry leaves or shredded newspaper.

Too much carbon will slow down decomposition. Too much nitrogen creates an unpleasant odor.

What to Compost, What to Avoid

Green Materials (High Nitrogen)

- Vegetable scraps
- Garden waste
- Freshly cut grass, flowers, and leaves
- Coffee and tea
- Fresh manure from horses or chickens
- Most kitchen scraps

Brown Materials (High Carbon)

- Dried leaves
- Straw or hay
- Wood chips from shrubs and trees
- Sawdust
- Newspaper (shredded)

Cardboard

Materials to Avoid

- Black Walnut leaves and bark
- Meat, bones, and dairy products
- Sugary foods
- Pet waste and plastics
- Invasive plants and their seeds



When to Add Compost to your Garden or Yard

Compost can be used in many ways around your home. Compost can enrich your lawn, your vegetable garden, add a boost of nutrients to your ornamental flowers, and support newly planted trees. Here are few ways to add compost to your yard care routine:

- Mix it into flower bed and vegetable garden planting areas to improve soil properties. Before planting, mix a 3 to 4 inch layer of compost into newly reclaimed or poor soils.
- Mix a 1/2 to 3 inch layer of compost into annual garden beds at least once a year.
- Spread a 1 to 4 inch layer of coarse compost around flowers, shrubs, trees, and vegetables as a mulch. Composts with larger particle size are generally better for mulches.
- Apply, and maintain, a 3-inch layer of coarse compost around trees and shrubs, keeping it at least a foot away from tree trunks.
- Topdress your lawn by evenly spreading 1/8 – 1/2 inch layer of compost over established grass (high end only for cool-season species such as tall fescue that are not mowed as short as warm-season grasses).
- Use compost in potting mixes for indoor and outdoor plants. Sprinkle a thin layer of compost around houseplants. Make a potting soil by mixing one part compost with one part sand, 1 part ground bark, and one part peat moss.
- If you don't have a garden – use it with house plants, give it to a friend, or donate it to a community garden.

