



Gardeners Helping Gardeners Succeed

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All About Composting

An average resident throws away almost 3/4 of a ton of grass clippings, leaves and tree trimmings each year. Since these materials are relatively clean and biodegradable, disposal in landfills is unnecessary and wasteful. If yard wastes decompose in landfills, they generate methane gas and acidic leachate, which can damage the environment. Composting is an easy way to turn your unwanted green stuff into a useful material which can be used to:

- loosen tight, heavy clay soils,
- mulch around garden and landscape plants,
- add to potting soils for container grown plants,
- enrich soil with a natural source of nutrients.

Active Compost

To make compost fast, build an active compost pile and work it. Composting microorganisms need a steady supply of water and air. The more they get, the faster they work.

There are five key steps to making an active compost pile:

1. **Shred and chop.** “The smaller the better” is the rule. Tip: run your lawn mower over fallen leaves to chop them.
2. **Mix dry browns and wet greens.** “Dry browns” (leaves, hay, and straw) are carbon-rich, “wet greens” (manure, kitchen scraps, and grass clippings) are nitrogen-rich. Keep a fair mix of both throughout your pile. Tip: use grass clippings sparingly and mix them in well so they don’t mat down.
3. **Strive for size.** Your pile should be at least 3 feet square and 3 to 4 feet tall to really get cooking. In a couple of days, it should be hot in the middle, a sign that your microbial decomposers are working hard.
4. **Add water as needed.** Keep the pile moist, but not too wet (like a damp sponge).
5. **Keep things moving.** Add air to the mix. Turn the compost with a pitchfork, move the entire pile bit by bit, or use a compost tumbler that does it for you.

Creative Collecting

Anything organic can be composted — newspapers, tea bags, haircut clippings, as well as the usual yard and garden residue. Useful materials to add to your pile include manure or stable litter, orchard litter, sawdust or wood shavings, peanut shells, vegetable trimmings, and pet hair.

Never add these to your compost pile:

- Meats, dairy products, or grease
- Kitchen scraps that are heavy with oil
- Droppings from cats, dogs or other carnivores
- Diseased plants, weeds that have gone to seed, or perennial weeds with spreading roots

Good old grass and leaves

Good compost can be made easily from four ingredients: dry leaves, fresh grass clippings, water, and soil. Just follow these simple steps:

- Collect dry leaves and some fresh grass clippings
- Mix two to four buckets of clippings with ten buckets of leaves
- As you work, spray the materials with a hose so that the mix feels wet, but not soggy. Also, add a shovel of good garden soil as you go to introduce friendly composting bacteria to the pile.
- Repeat steps 2 and 3 until your pile is finished.

If you turn the mix weekly and add more water if the pile dries out, you should have rich, beautiful compost in one to two months.

Build a Bin

A compost bin is easy to build. It will make composting easier by allowing air to penetrate the pile, which reduces odors and speeds the composting process. A compost bin should be about 3 feet square and 3 feet tall, and can be built out of old shipping pallets, wire mesh, snow fence, concrete blocks or pressure treated lumber. Retail stores often carry attractive bins made out of recycled plastic. The successful compost bin should:

- Allow for good air circulation around the compost pile
- Allow you to remove finished compost from the bottom of the bin without taking the whole thing apart.