Four steps to compost

Composting can be as much or as little work as you want to make it. The more effort you put into it, however, the faster you will have finished compost.

A "hot pile" can reach temperatures of 140°F at its center. It decomposes faster, because the pile has the optimum mixture of materials, moisture and air. These conditions attract the most efficient microbes to do the work of breaking down organic materials into compost.

A "cold pile" takes little effort and will also produce compost in the end, but it will take more time.

1. Is a container needed?

There are a few ways you can go. One is not to have a container at all. Many people compost in a heap in a corner of their yard. Because composting is a natural process, there is no need for any kind of a structure.

Some people choose to use plastic containers or wooden bins that can provide several benefits: retaining moisture in the pile, containing any odors, and keeping out animals.

2. Where to compost

Try to find a spot on bare ground that gets a fair amount of shade, so your pile is not dried out by the sun in the hot summer months.

Keep your compost pile far enough away from your back door so that it is not a nuisance. But, try to keep it close enough so that it is not a long trek with kitchen waste, particularly in the winter.

3. Build your pile

To create ideal conditions for your compost pile, layer or mix roughly equal amounts of high-nitrogen "Greens" (wet and soft material) and high-carbon "Browns" (dry and woody).

A pile with too many Greens may generate odors. A pile with more Browns will still turn into compost, but it will take longer.

To avoid possible odors or pests, bury food scraps under Browns such as leaves or finished compost. The easiest way to do this is to keep a bag of leaves or other Browns nearby. Just throw in a few handfuls to cover your newly added Greens!

4. Add air and water

The micro-organisms in a compost pile need air and water to work efficiently.

Air: To make sure that air can penetrate to the center of your pile, it shouldn't be larger than 5 feet high by 5 feet wide. Layering the pile with coarse materials such as brush and twigs will help air circulation. You can accelerate the composting process by turning your pile using a pitchfork or shovel.

Water: Your pile should be damp, about as moist as wrung-out sponge. You may want to water it periodically during a dry spell, or after adding large amounts of dry materials.

When is compost finished?

Relax, don't worry! When individual materials can no longer be identified and the pile resembles rich dark soil, the compost is ready. It will smell sweet, woodsy, and earthy. From start to end, the process can take 6 to 24 months.

Composting takes little effort and just a few changes in our habits. It doesn't require hard work because it's a natural process -- something that just happens.

In the end, we're just creating the opportunity for compost to make itself!

Why compost at home?

Healthier garden

Composting produces a valuable soil amendment that can improve the texture and fertility of the soil.

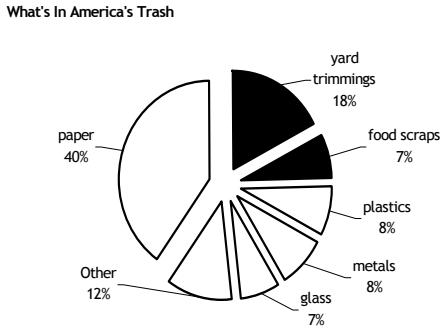
Compost is rich in organic matter and nutrients, and helps make nutrients more effective by binding them to the soil so that they don't run off with rainwater.

Compost also improves the structure of soil, increases its water-holding ability, and makes it easier to till.

- ✓ Spread compost on your lawn & garden
- ✓ Spread it under trees & shrubs
- ✓ Use as potting soil for houseplants
- ✓ Give it to your gardening friends

Waste reduction

Home composting reduces the amount of waste going to landfills and the energy needed to transport it. Almost 25% of household waste can be composted.



Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

What To Compost

B's are "Browns" and G's are "Greens"

From the house

- ✓ Fruit and vegetable scraps (G)
- ✓ Baked goods, including bread (G)
- ✓ Rice, pasta, and grains (G)
- ✓ Tea leaves/bags (G)
- ✓ Coffee grounds and filters (G)
- ✓ Egg shells (G)
- ✓ Shredded paper (B)
- ✓ Ash from wood and paper (B)

From the yard and workshop

- ✓ Leaves (B)
- ✓ Grass Clippings and weeds (G)
- ✓ Brush (break into small pieces) (B)
- ✓ Non-diseased plants and cuttings (GB)
- ✓ Sawdust from untreated wood (B)

What To Leave Out

From the house

- × All meat, including chicken
- × Fish and shellfish
- × Fat, grease, oils
- × Dairy products, including cheese

From the yard

- × Weeds that have gone to seed
- × Diseased plants
- × Large branches, roots, etc.
- × Dog and cat waste
- × Charcoal ash

Backyard Composting

In 4 Easy Steps

Get MORE Out Of Gardening

College Park
Committee for a Better Environment

This brochure was prepared for College Park Residents as a volunteer project of the Committee For A Better Environment (CBE).

For information about CBE and our activities, please visit www.ci.college-park.md.us or call the City Clerk at 301-864-8666.

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