

How to Make Organic Compost

A Beginner's Guide to the Art of Organic DIY Composting

With “green” gardening becoming more and more popular, many gardeners are turning toward making their own organic compost for a number of reasons, from low cost (relative to store-bought versions) to reducing landfill waste, to simply benefiting from the high quality and mineral and nutrient rich nature of organic, homemade compost.

Greens + Browns + Oxygen + Water = Healthier Plants!

While reasonably easy to learn, there are a few tricks of the trade to ensure that your organic compost is mixed and aerated properly, that it stays at the right temperature, and that it will provide all the wonderful benefits it should.

Choosing a Bin

Compost bins come in a variety of sizes, shapes, and materials. Prices vary from practically nothing to upwards of \$150.

Homemade bins can be created out of a number of recycled materials such as scrap wood, cinderblocks, wire mesh, bricks, or a combination of each. Regardless of the materials used to build the bin, it is important that the unit is constructed to withstand the weight of the composting materials and to maintain the proper composting temperature (140-160 degrees Fahrenheit) when it is full. Additionally, it must withstand the elements and intrusion by wild animals while allowing proper drainage and air-flow. And, of course, it should fit your needs and the space allotted.

Store bought bins are generally (though not always) plastic, durable, and lightweight. They come in any number of colors, shapes and sizes. Features vary from manufacturer to manufacturer but often include built-in lids with venting holes for aeration and drainage, trays for sifting the different materials, and access doors for removing material ready for application. Some even allow for “tumbling” the material, a practice that allows for more effective aeration or separating the material relative to when it was placed in the bin. Depending on your budget and need, there are myriad commercial composting bins for indoors and out available at your nearest home and garden retailer.

Creating the Perfect Organic Compost: The Compost Equation

The goal of every composter should be to produce the richest, most nutritious and viably useful organic compost possible.

The materials you will be contributing to your compost bin, from household kitchen scraps and refuse to lawn clippings and leaves, will *eventually* break down. Therefore, you will always be producing usable compost, though the time-frame will depend on your methodology.

Since compost becomes compost as microorganisms (bacteria known as *actinomyces* and fungi) feed upon the materials in your bin, these pathogens require a few basics in order to do what Mother Nature intended them to do. Therefore, it is important to have an understanding of what is going in your bin and when, as the effectiveness of the compost and how fast it will be usable is reliant on a balance between the “green” and “brown” materials introduced.

In short, for every pound or so of “green” nitrogen material you put in to the bin like coffee grounds, fruit and vegetable peelings, and grass clippings, you will want to include a pound of “brown” carbon-rich material like straw or dead leaves. Too much of either material can slow down the

decomposing process and/or lead to unpleasant smells.

Oxygen and moisture are essential for the microorganisms to keep functioning aerobically. Too little moisture in the bin will lead to a pile of dried-out, crispy matter as opposed to rich and slightly dampened material. Too much moisture will drown the microorganisms, depriving them of the oxygen necessary for life. Turn your compost once or twice a month with a pitchfork, shovel, or aerating tool and add a little water if needed. Proper aeration can result in rich, moist compost ready to use in a few weeks rather than a few months.

To Compost or Not to Compost?—That is the Question

Now that some of the basics of composting have been outlined, it is important to develop an understanding of just exactly what sort of items you can put into the compost bin and why.

Remember: for creating organic compost it is generally preferable to only include those items that are themselves organic or organically grown!

The following is a short list of materials that are **suitable** for composting and commonly found around the house:

Nitrogens:

- Coffee grounds
- Banana peels (chop them up for quicker break down)
- Flowers (but only if they are green and not dried)
- Vegetable and fruit peels (chop them up for quicker break down; do not use lime peels, as they can abruptly and detrimentally increase the pH levels of the material leading to the death of the beneficial organisms)
- Pet food (preferably not meat-based)
- Lawn clippings (again, only if they are green)

Carbons:

- Leaves (chop them up for quicker break down)
- Dried grass clippings
- Hedge clippings (chop them up for quicker break down)
- Dried corn stalks and cobs (chop them up for quicker break down)
- Pine needles
- Saw dust and wood shavings (but only from wood that has not been chemically treated)
- Peat moss
- Nut shells/peanut hulls
- Tea leaves

The following is a short list of **unsuitable** items for the compost bin:

- Ashes from the barbeque (charcoal)
- Dog and cat feces (may contain disease organisms so avoid at all costs! If one chooses to use manure only use material from organically raised animals like cows, goats, horses, etc. with ratios of 16-18:1)
- Meat, bones, fat, grease, oils (will not break down and will attract unwanted animal visitors)
- Lime
- Non-white/colored/dyed paper
- Toxic materials (household cleaners or water with cleaners added)
- Any materials that are not biodegradable

Upon following these very basic guidelines the DIY gardener will soon have what master gardeners have long considered the “bee’s knees” for their beds, lawns and gardens. Use this homemade, nutrient-rich organic compost as a soil amendment, fertilizer, or mulch and watch your vegetables, flowers, and other plants flourish like never before, all while lessening waste in the home.

Happy gardening!

