



## ***The Dirt on Backyard Composting***

### **What is Compost?**

Compost is broken down organic matter.

The composting process occurs in nature as plant and animal waste material is returned to the earth and then processed by decomposers. The nutrients from the waste material are then used again by living plants as food to start the cycle all over again.

### **Backyard Composting**

Backyard composting mimics the process that has been perfected by nature. The waste from our homes and yards can be added to the backyard compost pile. With enough care and time, those materials will turn into a nutrient-rich product that can be added to the yard or garden.



### **WHY COMPOST?**

The process of composting and using compost on your yard or in your garden has many benefits:

- Materials used in composting (leaves, grass clippings, food scraps, etc.) are items that usually go to the landfill. Composting **reduces waste** and is considered organic recycling.
- Adding compost to existing soil **improves the texture of the soil** which increases the soil's ability to hold water.
- Compost will **improve your soil's ability to support plant life**. It does this by increasing the amount of nutrients that are available to your plants, reducing the need for synthetic fertilizers, supporting beneficial bacteria, and feeding helpful earthworms.

### **PARTS OF A COMPOST PILE**

Five main ingredients are needed for the composting process to start.

- Nitrogen-rich materials (Greens)
- Carbon-rich materials (Browns)
- Air
- Water
- Time

#### **NITROGEN-RICH MATERIALS**

Every compost pile needs nitrogen-rich materials like food scraps and grass clippings that are still very alive. This is why many sources will refer to them as "greens." These items tend to decay rapidly and will put off a bad smell if they are not mixed with carbon-rich materials.

#### **CARBON-RICH MATERIALS**

Carbon-rich materials, or "browns," are materials that are more dead than they are alive. Most carbon-rich materials will be dry and crunchy. Examples include dried leaves, cardboard, wood and straw.

#### **AIR & WATER**

Every compost pile should be about 50% water in order to break down quickly. It should also have access to air. Without air, the composting process becomes anaerobic and will put off a bad odor.

#### **TIME**

The amount of time needed to create compost depends on the process you choose. The type of pile is the biggest factor for time.

## TYPES OF COMPOSTING

### HOT & COLD COMPOSTING

Pile-based composting is the most common method used by backyard composters. Each method involves combining three-parts brown material with one-part green materials, adding 50% water and enough mass to keep the pile moist. The recommended minimum size for a compost pile is 1 cubic yard.

The difference between hot and cold composting is the amount of time the composter has decided to dedicate to their compost pile.

Hot composting involves:

- Building a complete pile all in one day.
- Keeping a daily temperature log.
- Turning the pile every 7-10 days to maintain a temperature between 140-160 degrees.
- Turning the pile if it falls under 140 degrees.
- Turning the pile if it climbs over 165 degrees.
- Letting the pile sit when it no longer heats up above 90 degrees.

For many people, hot composting takes too much active time. Cold composting involves combining brown and green material in the correct amounts, adding water and waiting for the compost to be ready. With hot composting, the pile may be finished in as little as 2 months. For cold composting, it can take up to a year to get a finished product. Both of these methods may be done in a store-bought bin, a homemade bin or even just in a stand-alone pile. The choice is yours!

### KEYHOLE GARDEN

The keyhole garden is an African method that incorporates composting directly in the growing space. Nutrients from the composting material flows into the soil where the produce is planted.

### BURIED COMPOST

Similar to the keyhole garden, buried compost involves a container, like a trash can, to be poked with holes and buried almost completely in the ground with a tight-fitting lid. This method is great for avoiding rats and other critters from finding your food scraps. Several bins can be installed, if desired. The finished compost can be scooped out and used or it may be left in the bin for the nutrients to leach into the surrounding growing spaces.

### TRENCH COMPOSTING

This type of composting involves digging a 12-inch deep trench in the ground or in a raised bed, filling it with food scraps and covering it with soil. Worms and other soil organisms will quickly break down the material and add nutrients directly into the soil. This method is great for disposing of large amounts of food scraps.



keyhole garden (top)  
buried compost (middle)  
trench composting (bottom)

## What to Compost?

### Nitrogen-Rich Materials

Animal manure, coffee grounds, dryer lint, vacuum lint, eggshells, fruits, veggies, grass clippings, hair, fur, tea bags, nut shells, green leaves, wool rags, weeds, garden trimmings

### Carbon-Rich Materials

Cardboard, clean paper, fireplace ashes, hay, straw, dried leaves, sawdust, newspaper, wood chips, yard trimmings, cotton rags

### Do NOT Compost

Black walnut tree leaves or twigs, coal or charcoal ash, dairy products, egg yolks/whites, fats/oils, pet waste, yard trimmings treated with chemicals



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