

Starting Your Compost



In nature, materials like leaves and branches fall to the ground and are consumed by bacteria, fungi, algae and insects. With composting, you hack this natural process and improve its efficiency so your organic "waste" can be recycled. Depending on climatic conditions such as heat and moisture, this process can take as little as a few weeks to upward of a few months. Properly done, composting creates heat through the decomposition process, and this heat can get hot enough to eliminate harmful pests and even help break down residual chemicals!

Understanding Aerobic and Anaerobic Decomposition

Starting compost bins or piles is an easy process but does require some input to keep things humming along. There are two kinds of decomposition: aerobic and anaerobic. Aerobic decomposition requires airflow and is essential to the microenvironment you're looking to create within your compost bin or pile. On the other hand, anaerobic decomposition leads to a slower, smelly process that will inevitably attract the unwanted attention of vermin and neighbors alike! To keep your compost healthy, you can achieve airflow by regularly turning the organic matter or layering.

Deciding Between a Compost Pile and a Compost Bin

Starting compost production at home can take one of two forms: the compost pile or the compost bin. The differences between the two have more to do with your personal preference, experience and the amount of space you have available for composting. Compost piles are the most simple and cost-effective approach to composting at home and can amount to nothing more than a pile of detritus piled somewhere in an out-of-the-way location of your yard. Alternatively (and preferably), a pile can be contained within a wire or wooden structure.

If you're a beginner interested in composting with food scraps from the kitchen and smaller amounts of yard waste, **compost bins** and **tumblers** are a much better option. These containers are often constructed of lightweight plastic specifically designed to encourage airflow, allow drainage and keep unwanted pests at bay. Bins and tumblers are also designed to be visually appealing and can be placed just about anywhere in the yard.

Knowing What Can and Can't Be Composted

All organic matter eventually decomposes, but for the compost bin, a bit of discretion is advised. Compost should have a mixture of leafy, moist "greens," such as leaves, fruits, vegetables and grass clippings, along with "browns," such as dry leaves, small twigs, sawdust and paper. Aim to keep about a 3 to 1 ratio of browns to greens.

You can also include kitchen and house waste in compost, but avoid adding meats, fats, oils, and cat or dog feces. Vegetable scraps, eggshells, fruits, newspapers and disease-free houseplant leaves are all great additions to the compost bin. A good way to hold and transfer kitchen and other household waste to the compost bin is by using a **compost pail**. Store your pail under the sink, and periodically dump the contents into your compost bin so as to not attract fruit flies and other pests.

In addition to the organic waste that "feed" composters, you can add several handfuls of garden soil to add beneficial bacteria, fungi and essential nutrients to your compost for a faster and more well-rounded decomposition.

Troubleshooting Compost

Now that you know how to start a compost pile, how do you maintain it? Depending on the climate and other environmental conditions, compost can be ready for use in the garden in as little as three weeks and may take as long as four months or more. Warmer weather and humidity increase the process, while cooler weather and dry conditions will slow the process.

When ready, compost should be dark brown to black in color and crumble in your hand. Healthy compost has a fresh aroma similar to petrichor, the "after rain" smell. Soggy or slimy compost with a putrid odor is a sign the mix has become anaerobic and more browns (dry leaves, sawdust, cardboard, paper) should be added to help bring back a balance. Conversely, if the compost is overly dry and doesn't seem to be breaking down, adding more greens (leaves, fruits, vegetables, grass clippings) will increase the moisture content and create a better environment for composting microbes.

Unhealthy or overly slow composting can lead to an increase in vermin. Rats, mice, raccoons and other critters are especially attracted to the seeds and food scraps that might be present in the compost. To deter hungry little mouths, use properly sealed compost bins and tumblers that allow for air exchange while minimizing areas of entry for even the smallest unwanted guest.

Using Compost

Once the compost is ready for use in the garden, you can evenly distribute it across the soil surface or till it in. Compost provides plants with a natural, low-dose boost of nutrients and increases soil vitality by adding beneficial fungi and bacteria. Many compost bins and tumblers have a spigot to capture "compost tea." You can add this watery mix directly to the garden, or mix it with water prior to distribution.

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