

## Make Your Own Backyard Compost



Compost results from the aerobic decomposition of plant and animal organic matter, i.e., mixtures of food, wood, manure, etc. It is soil-like in texture and appearance and can be used as a soil amendment to help improve soil structure, water holding capacity and nutrient quality. It is referred to as humus because of its humic acids, organic substances which help to free the nutrients naturally available from the soil, causing it to take on a dark brown or black color.

### Reasons why you should compost

- Recycle natural nutrients for other living things
- To reduce waste sent to the city landfill
- Help to sustain one's environment
- To use in your garden as a soil additive
- Improve soil without having to add chemicals
- Reduce greenhouse gases
- To create mulch
- Produce rich humus for plants
- Save money on chemical fertilizers
- Encourage environmental stewardship
- To appreciate the value of "waste" as a natural resource

### Can anyone start a compost?

Absolutely! Composting is a process suitable for all walks of life; from the housewife to business owners and entrepreneurs, to school children or the environmental enthusiast. Composting is for the entire community and can be done as a school or neighborhood project or an activity for the family. Composting reduces waste, recycles it and reuses the end product in a number of ways (see the "*How can I use my compost*" section below).

### Some familiar items you can compost

#### 'Greens' or nitrogen rich ingredients

- Urine (diluted with water 20:1)
- Fresh, green fallen leaves
- Fresh grass cuttings
- Raw vegetable peelings
- Tea bags and leaves, coffee grounds
- Young green weed growth – avoid weeds with seeds
- Soft green prunings,
- Animal manure from herbivores, e.g. cows and horses
- Poultry manure and bedding, goat and hog manure
- Bagasse (sugar cane residue)

#### 'Browns' or carbon rich ingredients

- Cardboard, e.g., cereal packets and egg boxes
- Waste paper and junk mail, including shredded confidential waste
- Glossy magazines, newspaper
- Bedding from vegetarian pets e.g., rabbits, guinea pigs – e.g., hay, straw, shredded paper, wood shavings

- Tough hedge clippings
- Sawdust
- Dry woody prunings
- Dry fallen leaves

### Do not compost these items

- Meat
- Fish
- Cooked food, greasy foods
- Coal ash
- Cat litter
- Dog faeces
- Disposable diapers

### What types of compost bins are available?

There are numerous prefabricated compost systems out there, however, there are many simple make-it-yourself designs too or you may choose to not use a bin (a no bin system). You should probably research the different types and see which suits you best. Here are some that may be simple to construct to get a quick start on your composting:

**Wire bin  
Trash can bin**



**Wooden bin  
Tumbler or rotating bin**



### How to make your own compost

Making your own compost is very simple. There are three ways you can do this but keep in mind that the more care and attention you put into your compost, the faster and better your results. There are many compost recipes available and "How to" step-by-step instructions on line (see web site listings below). The following gives a brief description.

#### "Hot" compost Mix

If you want to see fast results, i.e., compost in a matter of 4-6 weeks, then the hot mix is your best bet. Gather your material in a 1:1 ratio of "greens" to "browns", chop into smaller pieces if necessary, mix outside before placing in your container or pile, add enough moisture so that your pile is moist but not wet that it drips, maintain a hot temperature and turn occasionally to add oxygen and to ensure a uniform compost process.

#### "Cold" compost mix

In a cold mix, you can add compost material whenever you want or when the material becomes available like kitchen waste, egg boxes, toilet roll middles and similar household paper and cardboard products. Add water if it gets too dry, or add dry material if it becomes soggy. This process can take 6 months and up to a year to breakdown before you get the compost you want and it is prone to unpleasant odours if your "greens" and "browns" are not balanced. If you've got the time, then this is surely the route for you.

#### "Hybrid" compost mix

This mix utilizes the hot and cold mix. Add material to your heap as it becomes available which is characteristic of the "cold" mix and turn the pile, typical of the "hot" mix, when you can. The

turning not only helps your pile to heat up but increases the rate at which the composting occurs.

**Two compost recipes to get you started:** <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/extension/compostfacility/compost6.htm>

**Yard or Garden Compost**  
**Add a mixture of some or all of these ingredients:**

- Hay or straw
- Grass clippings
- leaves
- sawdust
- wood chips
- weeds and other garden waste
- manures
- shredded paper

**When is my compost ready for use?**

When the material in your compost pile has changed to a dark brown, earthy smelling material, is pleasant to the touch and crumbles readily, smile, because you have just completed the composting process. If your compost has lumps or pieces of twigs, not to worry, just sieve it and use the residue in a new compost pile.

**How can I use my compost?**

- As a lawn dressing.
- Dig it into your garden in the fall or spring.
- Add to houseplants
- As a mulch
- Use as a potting and seed starting mix.
- As a soil amendment
- Spread around trees and vegetables

**Some Frequently Asked Questions**

**1. Do I need any special equipment?**

A garden fork for turning and spreading the compost is sufficient.

**2. How long will my compost take before it is ready?**

This depends on whether you are using a hot, cold or hybrid compost mix. The hot mix yields fast results; the hybrid is not fast but also not as slow as the cold mix which takes very long.

**3. Will my compost attract rats?**

Not generally, unless they are already in the area. If rodents are nesting in your compost, it is an indication that your compost pile is too dry. You can remedy this by adding water until the pile is moist but not dripping wet.

**4. Is compost safe to handle?**

Yes, be sure to keep any cuts covered and wash your hands before eating.

**5. Do I need a shredder to make compost?**

Not at all. Although useful in cases of items such as wood or cardboard materials, it is not essential.

**6. Can poisonous plants be composted?**

Sure. The toxins in poisonous plants are broken down and will not cause any damage to you or your garden.

**Kitchen Compost**  
**Add a mixture of some or all of these ingredients:**

- vegetable peels and seeds
- fruit peels and seeds
- coffee grounds and filters
- eggshells
- nutshells
- and other vegetable or fruit scraps

Like ants, flies also participate in the composting process. Their occurrence can be reduced by covering any fruit waste among other ingredients. Flies can also mean your pile is too wet or has too many 'green' ingredients. Just add 'brown' ingredients, mix well and cover.

**For additional information on composting, visit any of these web sites:**

- <http://www.marquisproject.com/composting101/whycomp.html>
- <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/extension/compostfacility/compost3.htm>
- [http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/caer/ce/earth/recycle/compost\\_waste.htm](http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/caer/ce/earth/recycle/compost_waste.htm)
- <http://www.howtocompost.org/>
- [http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/organicgardening/compost\\_pf.php](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/organicgardening/compost_pf.php)

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