

Composting in Just Four Basic Steps

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Compost is a nutrient-rich organic matter, generally dark in colour and resembles topsoil. It is the controlled breakdown of biodegradable yard and kitchen wastes. It takes Mother Nature 1000 years to make just one inch of humus-rich soil. Composting efforts can consistently yield mighty fine tilth in just a fraction of time – from a few weeks to a few months. Compost helps to improve and return essential nutrients back into the earth, such as phosphorus, potassium, nitrogen and many trace materials. It is the environmental 'black gold' that improves soil aeration, tilth and drainage.

The choice to compost has incredible benefits for your home and yard, and of course the earth. The average human waste is approximately 17.6 kg a day and that works out to be about 440,000 kg of garbage over a lifetime span. The garbage from your home can be lessened by as much as 35 % by just composting kitchen and yard waste. By composting you will be protecting and improving your home environment as well as saving money on garbage handling fees, soil additives and natural fertilizers. Also you should feel proud about doing your part in helping to protect and conserve the Earth's resources.

Plan your system around the four basic rules of composting; 1) correct ingredients 2) air circulation 3) consistent moisture and 4) adequate volume. For every good recipe it takes the right ingredients. The same is true about your compost. Food scraps such as orange and grapefruit rinds, apple cores, old lettuce, onion skins, other raw vegetable scraps, stale bread, coffee grounds and the like are excellent ingredients of your compost bin. Do not put grease, bones, meat scraps or dairy products in your pile as they will smell bad, attract animals and rodents and take a very long time to breakdown. Yard waste such as grass clippings, leaves, weeds, plant debris, etc are important ingredients for successful composting. They are considered a 'brown' source of carbon when dry and a 'green' source of nitrogen when fresh. Don't put in your bin yard debris that is diseased, full of weed seeds or if it has been sprayed with pesticides, herbicides or fungicides. Manure from grass eaters (cows, sheep & goats), chickens and rabbits is a valuable nitrogen source. They act as an activator to heat up the pile and get things working. Don't compost human, cat or dog waste as they carry disease pathogens.

Adequate air circulation in and around your compost bin is another essential step in composting. Therefore plan the location of your bin carefully. When choosing the site keep in mind the accessibility for easy usage – near the back door or porch but out of the full sun to prevent excessive heat build up in the plastic bins. This location should also be away from large trees as their roots may steal nutrients from the compost. Air circulation within the compost bin/pile is also necessary. Turning or aerating your compost pile creates new passageways for air and moisture. Every pile needs a periodic influx of oxygen. Without proper air circulation your compost may be rather sluggish and have slower decomposition.

Consistent moisture is also a necessary ingredient for composting. Therefore when planning the location for your bin, you should consider a nearby water source. That source can be in the form of an outside water spigot or hose or your rain barrel. The moisture level of your compost bin should be that of a damp wrung out sponge. Therefore from time to time you may have to add some moisture of either water or a layer of fresh grass clippings.

Finally, having an adequate volume in your bin is necessary. 'Add-as-you-go' pile, which is the most common form of composting, takes longer. With the lack of enough ingredients or volume, it will slow down the decomposing, as the pile/bin does not heat up well and the finished compost may be less nutrient rich. There is nothing wrong with this form of composting, as it is the most popular for quick disposal of grass clippings, good for homes with little waste and takes a minimal effort. Just keep in mind it can take up to 6 to 8 months for your end product.

Think of composting as an investment in the Earth. With little planning and very little effort, this venture will result in profit of a healthier and happier environment.