



Composting

Prepared by Sharon Yiesla of
Sharon Yiesla, Horticultural Services

revised 9/15

What do we need to make compost?

We really only need 7 things:

1. Carbon sources: Materials like wood chips, dried leaves, corn stalks, straw, sawdust and twigs are good carbon sources.
2. Nitrogen sources: Grass clippings, fruit and vegetable wastes, fresh weeds, waste from the flower garden, manure and coffee grounds.
3. Micro-organisms: bacteria and fungi, which are naturally present in the soil and on organic matter.
4. Surface area: more surface area increases the rate of composting
5. Air: the micro-organisms that do the composting need air to live.
6. Moisture: the micro-organisms also need water to live.
7. Volume: if the pile is too small it will not heat up.

What should we leave out of the compost pile?

1. Pet wastes (feces) can contain parasites and disease organisms that may pose a health problem to humans.
2. Meat, bones, fats and dairy products. These items can attract animals.
3. Treated lumber. Scraps of treated lumber should be handled according to instructions provided by the seller of that lumber.
4. Grass clippings treated with weed killers (let pile age for a year if these have been added).

The recipe for making compost:

1. Mix the carbon and nitrogen sources together either in equal volumes or so that there is a little more nitrogen than carbon in the pile.
2. Add enough water so that the pile is only as moist as a wrung out sponge.
3. If the pile gets too wet at some time, turn the pile to add in air.
4. Microorganisms can be found on the yard waste we add to the pile. If the pile seems to be slow to compost, add a shovelful of GARDEN soil.

Where should you locate the compost pile?

1. Don't pile it against your wooden house.
2. If possible, put it near a water source.
3. Avoid putting it over the root system of shallow-rooted trees.
4. A sunny or windy site is fine, but be prepared to monitor moisture.
5. Avoid poorly drained sites.

How do we take care of the compost pile?

1. Add materials as the pile goes down. Keep a balance of carbon and nitrogen sources.
2. Add water when the pile is too dry. A dry pile won't compost.
3. Turn the pile when it is too wet. A wet compost pile will get smelly and slimy.
4. When the majority of the pile is composted, stop adding new material and let the pile finish composting.

Composting myths:

1. You must turn the pile. Not as much as you think. It will speed up the process.
2. You need lots of tools. There are only a few necessities: a garden hose to wet the pile, a garden fork to turn it from time to time, maybe something to chop up the yard waste.
3. The pile will smell bad. Not as long as it is properly managed.
4. If I compost evergreens, the pile will be too acidic. The pH of a finished pile is fairly close to neutral.
5. You need to buy an additive to 'activate' the pile. The yard waste gives you most of what you need. Add a shovelful of soil to mix in more micro-organisms.

What can go wrong and how do we fix it?

- The compost pile smells rotten. The pile is either too wet or has become compacted. Turn the pile, add dry materials.
- The compost pile smells like ammonia. There is too much nitrogen and too little carbon in the pile. Add carbon materials and mix them into the pile.
- The compost pile does not heat up.
 1. The pile may be too small. Make the pile at least 3 feet wide by 3 feet long by 3 feet tall.
 2. The pile may be too dry. Add water.
 3. There may be too little nitrogen. Add some.
 4. The weather may be too cold. The pile will heat up again when the weather warms up.

What can I do with the finished compost?

- Add it to soil to improve drainage and add nutrients
- Use it as mulch on top of the soil
- Add it to potting soil to improve it
- Use it as a seed-starting mix.