

Creating Compost

Composting is a process that takes kitchen and garden scraps and with the help of soil microbes, breaks those scraps down into a nutrient rich material that can be added back into your soil. Although this process may seem simple, there is more to composting than piling up garden waste if you want to be successful.

There are five major components that you need to add to your compost pile; soil, water, green matter, brown matter and fertilizer.

Adding soil helps your bin retain moisture and introduces the soil microbes who will be primarily responsible for breaking down your scraps. One easy way to introduce soil to your bin is to allow your bin to have contact with your soil through the bottom. This allows easy access for insects and soil microbes to penetrate your pile. You can also sprinkle soil into the layers of your pile. Soil should make up around 10% of your compost pile.

Your compost bin should always be as damp as a wet sponge with water making up approximately 5% of the pile. A bin that is too wet can cause a bad smell and dramatically slow the composting process. If you can layer your pile so that it is dish-shaped rainwater will naturally soak in, rather than run off a pile. If we receive excessive rains you will see a slowing down in the composting process. If this happens you can put a tarp over your compost bin until the rain stops.

The green matter in your compost pile would be grass clippings, flowers and foliage, vegetable and fruit scraps, coffee grounds with filters, tea bags and manure. These materials should make up approximately 30% of your pile. Manure should not come from dogs or cats as they carry diseases to which humans are susceptible. Manure from other animals should be fully composted, reaching temperatures of 150-160 degrees F for 3-5 days. These conditions will also kill weeds seeds. The temperature of your bin can be taken with a compost thermometer. If you do not intend to monitor temperatures do not use any manure or weeds. Yard waste with pests or diseases should not be used.

Brown matter should make up at least half of your compost pile. Fallen leaves, small twigs, straw, wood chips, newspaper, sawdust and eggshells are all brown matter. Newspaper should be shredded and moistened to speed up its decomposition. Large branches or pieces of wood will take a significant amount of time to break down and should not be added to your pile. You may add wood ashes as brown matter but ashes raise soil pH so a soil test should be performed more frequently when ashes are used. Meat should never be added to a compost pile as it can attract unwanted garden guests like raccoons.

Making up just 5 % of you compost pile, a high nitrogen fertilizer should be added. Fertilizer helps to feed soil microbes as they break down the materials. It is not essential to add fertilizer to compost, but it will hasten the process.

True composting involves regularly turning the pile and taking the internal temperature with a compost thermometer. Compost piles that reach temperatures between 150-160 degrees Fahrenheit can kill most plant disease and weed seeds. Once the temperature of the pile cools and the pile has decreased in size, the process is complete, and the compost is ready to use!