

Composting

Compost is the single most important supplement you can give your garden soil and is a simple way to add nutrient-rich humus which fuels plant growth and restores vitality to depleted soil. It's also free, easy to make and good for the environment.

Composting Benefits:

Soil conditioner: With compost, you are creating rich humus for lawn and garden. This adds nutrients to your plants and helps retain moisture in the soil.

Recycles kitchen and yard waste: Composting can divert as much as 30% of household waste away from the garbage can.

Introduces beneficial organisms to the soil: Microscopic organisms in compost help aerate the soil, break down organic material for plant use and ward off plant disease.

Good for the environment: Composting offers a natural alternative to chemical fertilizers.

Reduces landfill waste: Most landfills in North America are quickly filling up; many have already closed down. One-third of landfill waste is made up of compostable materials.

What to Compost:

Material	Carbon/Nitrogen	Info
table scraps	Nitrogen	add with dry carbon items
fruit & vegetable scraps	Nitrogen	add with dry carbon items
eggshells	neutral	best when crushed
leaves	Carbon	leaves break down faster when shredded
grass clippings	Nitrogen	add in thin layers so they don't mat into clumps
garden plants	--	use disease-free plants only
lawn & garden weeds	Nitrogen	only use weeds which have not gone to seed
shrub prunings	Carbon	woody prunings are slow to break down
straw or hay	Carbon	straw is best; hay (with seeds) is less ideal
green comfrey leaves	Nitrogen	excellent compost 'activator'
pine needles	Carbon	acidic; use in moderate amounts
flowers, cuttings	Nitrogen	chop up any long woody stems
seaweed and kelp	Nitrogen	apply in thin layers; good source for trace minerals
wood ash	Carbon	only use ash from clean materials; sprinkle lightly
chicken manure	Nitrogen	excellent compost 'activator'
coffee grounds	Nitrogen	filters may also be included
tea leaves	Nitrogen	loose or in bags
newspaper	Carbon	avoid using glossy paper and colored inks
shredded paper	Carbon	avoid using glossy paper and colored inks
cardboard	Carbon	shred material to avoid matting
corn cobs, stalks	Carbon	slow to decompose; best if chopped up
dryer lint	Carbon	best if from natural fibers
sawdust pellets	Carbon	high carbon levels; add in layers to avoid clumping
wood chips / pellets	Carbon	high carbon levels; use sparingly

How to begin:

1. Start your compost pile on bare earth. This allows worms and other beneficial organisms to aerate the compost and be transported to your garden beds.

2. Lay twigs or straw first, a few inches deep. This aids drainage and helps aerate the pile.
3. Add compost materials in layers, alternating moist and dry. Moist ingredients are food scraps, tea bags, seaweed, etc. Dry materials are straw, leaves, sawdust pellets and wood ashes. If you have wood ashes, sprinkle in thin layers, or they will clump together and be slow to break down.
4. Add manure, green manure (clover, buckwheat, wheatgrass, grass clippings) or any nitrogen source. This activates the compost pile and speeds the process along.
5. Keep compost moist. Water occasionally, or let rain do the job.
6. Cover with anything you have - wood, plastic sheeting, carpet scraps. Covering helps retain moisture and heat, two essentials for compost. Covering also prevents the compost from being over-watered by rain. The compost should be moist, but not soaked and sodden.
7. Turn. Every few weeks give the pile a quick turn with a pitchfork or shovel. This aerates the pile. Oxygen is required for the process to work, and turning "adds" oxygen. You can skip this step if you have a ready supply of coarse material, like straw.

Once your compost pile is established, add new materials by mixing them in, rather than by adding them in layers. Mixing, or turning, the compost pile is key to aerating the composting materials and speeding the process to completion.

Note: If you want to buy a composter, rather than build your own compost pile, you may consider a buying a rotating compost tumbler which makes it easy to mix the compost regularly.

Carbon/Nitrogen Ratio:

All compostable materials are either carbon or nitrogen-based, to varying degrees. The secret to a healthy compost pile is to maintain a working balance between these two elements.

- Carbon - carbon-rich matter (like branches, stems, dried leaves, peels, bits of wood, bark dust or sawdust pellets, shredded brown paper bags, corn stalks, coffee filters, conifer needles, egg shells, straw, peat moss, wood ash) gives compost its light, fluffy body.
- Nitrogen - nitrogen or protein-rich matter (manures, food scraps, green lawn clippings and green leaves) provides raw materials for making enzymes.

A healthy compost pile should have much more carbon than nitrogen. A simple rule of thumb is to use one-third green and two-thirds brown materials. The bulkiness of the brown materials allows oxygen to penetrate and nourish the organisms that reside there. Too much nitrogen makes for a dense, smelly, slowly decomposing anaerobic mass. Good composting hygiene means covering fresh nitrogen-rich material, which can release odors if exposed to open air, with carbon-rich material, which often exudes a fresh, wonderful smell. If in doubt, add more carbon!