

Get Started Composting in Winnetka

It's one of the best things you can do for the environment
—Why and How to Do It—



By Liz Kunkle

Food waste and composting are subjects that we at Go Green Winnetka are especially passionate about. One-third of all food produced globally is lost or wasted. In fact, if food waste were a country, it would be the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases, behind China and the United States. According to the EPA, food waste is the single largest material sent to landfills in the United States.

Food waste in landfills cannot break down properly. Engineered landfills are anaerobic environments, meaning without oxygen. Buried under layers of inorganic waste and without access to light or oxygen, food waste and other organic materials cannot decompose properly. When organic materials break down in anaerobic environments, methane gas is produced. Methane is a greenhouse gas that is 30 – 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide at trapping heat in the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide has a longer-lasting effect, but methane sets the pace for warming in the near term.

That's the bad news. The good news is, we can all be part of the solution, because the largest segment of food waste comes from households allowing food to go uneaten. By taking intentional steps to reduce your food waste, divert it from landfill, and compost it, you help not only to slow the effects of climate change, but to reverse them. This is one place where it really is true: your actions do make a difference.

The Basics

Composting is nature's way of recycling food and other organic waste. Nutrient-rich organic material, such as food waste, 100% paper and cotton, and yard waste trimmings, are preserved and converted into a healthy soil amendment called compost. Compost fortifies soil, holds water, reduces greenhouse gas emissions, and reduces the need for synthetic fertilizers, among other benefits.

Everything that was once alive may be composted. The magic that is compost rests on two main ingredients: carbon-rich material and nitrogen-rich material. The carbon camp is often referred to as "browns," because it includes things like dried leaves, dried grass clippings, cardboard, and straw. Nitrogen-rich "greens" include fresh leaves, fresh grass clippings, and food waste. You generally want two to four times as much brown or carbon-rich material as you have green or nitrogen-rich material.

Backyard Composting

Outdoors—In Winnetka, start composting in your backyard if you can, because you can compost food waste with minimal resources expended. Start small and be patient with yourself and your family/housemates. A covered bin or tumbler works best to help keep animals out and temperatures up. Select a dry, shady, or partly shady spot near a water source for your bin. For every measure of food waste material (nitrogen/green) you put in your bin, add double or more that measure of

landscape material (carbon/brown). It can be hard to find this much carbon material in your yard. Consider using peat moss as your carbon/brown material, which is readily available at local retailers and very inexpensive.

Indoors—Choose a container to collect your food waste indoors. The most common options are a 1-gallon ceramic bin, a 1.3-gallon stainless steel bin, and a 1.75-gallon plastic bin. Choose where you want to keep your container, for example, on or under a counter.

Home-based composting has the lowest carbon footprint, since it requires no transportation and involves the least processing. But it's not sufficient, because you can't compost *all* your food waste there. You want to stick to composting fruit and vegetable scraps only in your yard, as well coffee grounds, the occasional eggshell, and some 100% paper and cardboard scraps.

Commercial Composting

Commercial composting is a game-changer. With commercial composting, all food waste, food-contaminated 100% paper and cardboard, and other organic materials are collected. This includes meat, dairy, bones, greasy pizza boxes, etc. All this organic waste is hauled to a composting facility where it decomposes aerobically/properly, and the finished compost is sold commercially. ALL food waste may be collected through commercial composting, resulting in much greater waste diversion than on-site or backyard composting.

Luckily, there are many different commercial options available in our area, as well as ongoing and one-day drop off events.

Third Bin: In some communities, food waste may be collected year-round in a “third bin,” along with refuse and recycling.

Ride Along: Food waste also may be collected seasonally as part of a curbside program, where food waste “rides along” with landscape waste that is already collected curbside.

Container Swap: Container swap programs are offered year-round as a standalone service in many



communities, as well as a supplemental service to seasonal curbside programs. For your meat, dairy, bones, greasy pizza boxes and other 100% paper to-go containers, engage one of the container swap compost providers in Winnetka, namely WasteNot and Collective Resource Compost. They provide clean, lidded 5-gallon buckets, pick up the food waste, and take it to a commercial compost facility. When they pick up a full 5-gallon bucket, they leave a new clean one.

Other Ongoing or One-Day Collection

Events: Some communities also offer standing, ongoing drop-off collections for organic materials (like Glencoe) while some offer one-day events, like an annual Pumpkin Smash/collection event that is held after Halloween each year in many Chicagoland communities, including Winnetka.

The CliffsNotes

Keep these top five thoughts in mind:

1. Wasting food wastes everything—water, land, energy, labor, money, love, and all the other resources that go into producing it.
2. Composting food waste recognizes and treats it as the valuable resource it is.
3. If it grows, it goes [into the compost bin].
4. Everything that was once alive may be composted.
5. Buy and use finished compost.

For more information and to see food-waste and compost-related resources, please visit the Illinois Food Scrap Coalition at <https://illinoiscomposts.org>.



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