

# Start Composting in Winnetka

It's one of the best—and easiest—things you can do for the environment

By Liz Kunkle

Food waste and composting are subjects that Go Green Winnetka is especially passionate about. One-third of all food produced globally is lost or wasted. If food waste were a country, it would be the third largest emitter of greenhouse gasses 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. 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, a greenhouse gas 30 – 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide at trapping heat in the atmosphere, is produced. Carbon dioxide has a longer-lasting effect, but methane sets the pace for short-term warming.

We can all be part of the solution, because the largest segment of food waste comes from households that allow food to go uneaten. By taking intentional steps to reduce food waste, divert it from landfill, and compost it, you help not only to slow the effects of climate change, but to reverse them.

## 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, is 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**—Start composting in your backyard if you can, because it uses the fewest resources. Start small and be patient. A covered bin or tumbler works best to help keep animals out and temperatures up. Select a dry, shady, or partly shady spot 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. Stick to composting

fruit and vegetable scraps, as well coffee grounds, the occasional eggshell, and some 100% paper and cardboard scraps in your yard.

## Commercial Composting

Commercial composting is a game-changer. With commercial composting, all food waste (meat, dairy, bones), food-contaminated 100% paper and cardboard (greasy pizza boxes!), compostable take-out containers, and other organic materials are collected. All this organic waste is hauled to a composting facility where it is mixed with landscape waste, which allows the waste to decompose aerobically and properly. The resulting 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 is an increasing number of composting options available in Winnetka for residents, businesses, institutions, and events. Visit the Village of Winnetka website ([villageofwinnetka.org](http://villageofwinnetka.org)) for more details, including drop-off hours. The Illinois Food Scrap Coalition ([illinoiscomposts.org](http://illinoiscomposts.org)) and Go Green Winnetka ([gogreenwinnetka.org](http://gogreenwinnetka.org)) also have food scrap and compost-related resources.

**Container Swap for Residents**—Collective Resource Compost and WasteNot Compost have offered container swap compost services in Winnetka since 2019. They provide clean, lidded 5-gallon buckets, pick up food and other organic waste, and take it to a commercial compost facility. When they pick up a full 5-gallon bucket, they leave a new clean one. These providers also offer a cart-based option for larger families, groups of neighbors, and events. Customer service and billing for these container swap services are separate from Village refuse and recycling collection services.

**Cart-based for Businesses**—Collective Resource Compost and WasteNot Compost also have offered a cart-based program using 32-gallon carts in Winnetka since 2019. In June 2022, Lakeshore Recycling Services started offering a cart-based program to businesses using 65-gallon carts and 95-gallon carts. Customer service and billing for these cart-based services are separate from Village refuse and recycling collection services.

**Drop-Off for Residents**—Lakeshore Recycling Systems partnered with the Village and District 36

Winnetka Public Schools to offer sites as of August 2022 where residents may drop-off food scraps and other organics collected at home in carts located throughout the Village. These drop-off sites provide free

composting to both the host sites and the residents who use them. Currently, drop-off sites are located at Greeley School, Hubbard Woods School, Carleton Washburne School, New Trier's Winnetka Campus, Winnetka Congregational Church, and the Elm Street Train Station.

## Other/Ongoing Options—

Look for regular opportunities to compost around town. The Village has offered a Pumpkin Collection/"

Smash" event each year since 2014. Events like Breakfast with Santa, the Children's Fair, the Music Festival, Fall Fest, and more offer composting as part of their Zero Waste efforts. You can hire a container-swap provider to service an event—for far less than you'd expect! And you may always contact Go Green Winnetka at [gogreenwinnetka@gmail.com](mailto:gogreenwinnetka@gmail.com) with questions and ideas.



## Highlights:

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.

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