

Backyard Composting

In a nutshell, composting is creating an ideal habitat for “good” microorganisms (mostly aerobic bacteria). This is accomplished by balancing “greens,” “browns,” moisture, and air. Much like the food waste you will be composting, this paper is compostable. It is known as a “brown” material; something you layer on top of “green” materials in a 1-or-2-brown-to-1-green ratio. This layering action allows you to produce a *soil amendment* for your garden that is nutritionally balanced for your plants. With proper maintenance, you’ll be making your own wonderful compost.

Building and Maintaining the Compost Pile

A compost pile may be started by adding materials little by little or adding all materials at once to create a 3’x3’ pile of layered green and brown materials. It depends on how much material you have available to start. Always start at the bottom with a brown material and cap the pile off with a brown as well, it will help control flies and any escaping odors.

Here at the Worm Farm we make compost using manure, food waste, wood chips, but the average household is more likely to have the items used in the example below:

Wood chips (500:1), straw (75:1), dry yard waste (100:1)
Coffee grounds (20:1), kitchen scraps (15:1), non-seeding weed clippings (12:1), grass clippings (20:1)
Dead leaves (60:1), coffee filter, sawdust (600:1)
Fruit peels, vegetable peels, tea bags
Cardboard (560:1), egg cartons, paper (shredded)

The 3’x3’ pile size is important - it is the perfect size to allow for decomposition to begin where the pile will heat to 140-ish degrees and kill pathogens and unwanted seeds. When this temperature is reached, it’s time to turn the pile; or, if using a three bin system transfer to bin #2, but not before allowing the pile to sit and cook at 140 degrees for 72-ish hours (3-ish days). Aeration (turning) replenishes the oxygen in the pile and prevents it from going *anaerobic* - the most common reason why compost piles get stinky! After the initial turning, the pile should heat to 140-ish degrees again and will then have to be turned or transferred. Make sure to check moisture levels of your compost piles often. It should be moist to the touch, but not sopping wet. A pile that is too wet will go anaerobic and may produce chemicals toxic to plants. A pile that is too dry won’t support the microbial life needed to allow composting to happen!

Harvesting and Using the Compost

Compost can be harvested after three cycles of heating to 140 degrees, turning, cooling, and heating back up again, which usually takes about 6-8 months. Another sign compost is complete is when it no longer heats after turning and you can no longer identify the initial inputs. Finished compost is also dark brown in color and smells like good soil - it doesn’t have any lingering odor of the raw materials that went into it. If you come across clumps of under-decomposed items, just put them back into an active compost pile. Compost can be used in the garden or in pots - simply layer it in 4-6” sections and mix with native soil.