Composting

Compost is simply decomposed organic material, such as leaves, grass clippings, and kitchen waste. It provides many essential nutrients for plant growth and therefore is often used as fertilizer. Compost also improves soil structure so that soil can easily hold the correct amount of moisture and air. Compost improves the texture of both clay soils and sandy soils, making either type rich, moisture-retentive, and loamy.

The largest environmental benefit of compost is that it significantly reduces the amount of solid waste produced. The more we compost, the less we contribute to the cost of trash removal and the volume of materials in landfills. Using compost as fertilizer also cuts back on the use of chemical fertilizers, which can run off and contaminate water.

Compost Containers

The two basic kinds of composters are open bins and enclosed containers. Open bins are very simple and loosely encase the compost pile. They usually do not have a lid. They can be constructed with wood, chicken wire, or recycled plastic. Enclosed containers for composting include upright box-like containers and rotating drums that completely enclose the compost pile.

River Keepers

Example of a closed compost container.

Advantages of Open Bin Composting: Open bins easily collect rain water to speed the composting process. Open bins are also very convenient for adding materials to the compost pile.

Disadvantages of Open Bin Composting: Open bins can attract rodents, flies, bees, and bears. They can let in TOO much moisture for efficient composting, and they may be more difficult to mix.

Advantages of Closed Compost Containers: Closed compost containers will rarely attract pests. Rotating drums are the easiest type of composter to mix or turn. Closed compost containers are usually easy to unload.

Disadvantages of Closed Compost Containers: Enclosed containers require you to add water since they don't let in rain. Also, upright containers (not rotating drums) may be very difficult to mix or turn.

What to Compost

Efficient compost requires the correct mixture of "greens" and "browns." Green materials are high in nitrogen, while brown materials are high in carbon. The best combination of greens and browns is about 1 part greens to 4 parts browns. If you have more browns than that, you will still get compost but it will take longer. If you have too much green matter, you will get nothing more than a garbage heap. The best source of brown material is dry leaves.

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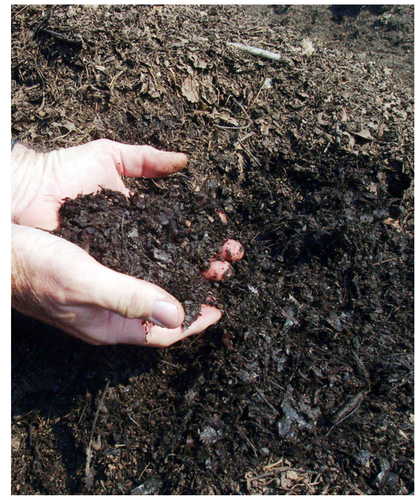
Example of an open compost bin.

Typical green materials:
Fresh (green) grass clippings
Fresh manure in moderation (horse, chicken, rabbit, cow)
Kitchen scraps (fruit, vegetables, coffee grounds, tea bags)
Weeds
Green leaves
Leftover fruits from the garden

Typical brown materials:
Brown, dry leaves
Dried grass
Cornstalks (shredded)
Straw
Sawdust in moderation



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Finished compost — ready to use!

What Not to Compost

Meat, fish, and animal fats – These materials may attract unwanted visitors to your compost pile.
Shredded newspapers or office paper – The paper likely contains chemicals that are not good for your compost. Recycle them instead.
Ashes from your grill – Wood ashes can be very useful in small quantities, but BBQ grill ashes should NEVER go into your compost pile.
Dog and cat feces – These materials can add diseases to your compost, and they have an unpleasant odor. Use chicken, horse, cow, and rabbit manure instead.

Composting Tips

You need a minimum of 1 cubic foot of raw materials for efficient composting, and more is better. As soon as decomposition begins, the volume of the pile will decrease. You might be tempted to add more materials at this point, but this resets the clock on that batch. You will have much better success if you refrain from adding raw materials to your batch of working compost, and simply start a new batch with new raw materials.

You will maximize your composting efforts if you continuously turn or mix the heap. Mixing your heap will help to keep the browns and greens in balance, will distribute moisture, and add oxygen to the mixture.

Finished compost is usually less than half the volume of the materials you started with, but it's much denser. When finished it should look, feel and smell like rich, dark soil. You should not be able to recognize any of the items you originally placed in the pile.

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