



Composting

Nature's Way to Recycle



What is Composting and Why Do it?

Composting, nature's way of recycling, is the controlled decomposition of organic material such as leaves, twigs, grass clippings, and vegetable food waste.

Compost is the soil product that results from proper composting. Composting helps to keep the high volume of organic material out of landfills, and turns waste material into a useful product. With organics making up more than half of California's municipal waste, on-site composting reduces the cost of hauling garbage and operating landfills.

Compost is great for gardens and landscaping and you save money by not having to buy soil conditioners, mulch, and fertilizer.

Composting Can Be Easy

Composting can be practiced in most backyards in a homemade or manufactured composting bin, or simply an open pile (some cities do require enclosed bins). Businesses, schools, and other facilities can also easily compost.



Homemade bins can be constructed out of scrap wood, chicken wire, snow fencing, or even old garbage cans (with holes punched in the sides and bottom).

Manufactured bins include turning bins, cones and stacking bins; these can be purchased from either retail or mail-order businesses. Take the time to consider your options and then select the bin that best fits your needs.

**For more information, call
951-486-3200 or visit:**

Low cost composting bins
www.rcwaste.org/composting/bins

FREE composting classes
www.rcwaste.org/classes

Recipe for Composting

There are four basic ingredients for composting: nitrogen, carbon, water and air. The easiest compost recipe calls for:

- Layering or mixing roughly equal parts of green material (which is high in nitrogen) and brown or dry material (which is high in carbon) in a pile or enclosure
- Watering
- Turning to add air
- Letting microorganisms and insects break down the material over time.

Nitrogen

Green materials such as grass clippings, landscape trimmings, and garden waste are ideal sources of nitrogen (once they dry out they become a carbon source). Vegetable and fruit trimmings and peels can also provide nitrogen. To reduce the potential for pests or odors, it is best to bury food scraps deep within the compost pile and avoid meat or dairy scraps.

Carbon

Brown (dry) yard and garden material such as dry leaves, twigs or hay can provide the carbon balance for a compost pile. Chop or shred large pieces to four inches (4") or shorter (thick, woody branches should be chipped, ground up or left out).

Untreated wood chips and sawdust are a powerful carbon source which may be useful if the pile contains excess nitrogen.

Size

Ideally, the compost pile should be three feet wide by three feet deep by three feet tall (one cubic yard). This size provides enough food and insulation to keep the organisms warm and happy and working hard. However, piles can be larger or smaller and work just fine if managed well.



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Water

Your compost pile should be “moist as a wrung-out sponge.” A moisture content of 40 to 60 percent is preferable. To test for adequate moisture, reach into your compost pile and grab a handful of material and squeeze it. If a few drops of water come out, it probably has enough moisture; if it doesn't, add water.

When you water, it is best to put a hose into the pile so that you aren't just wetting the top. You can also water as you turn the pile. During dry weather, you may have to add water regularly. During wet weather, you may need to cover your pile. A properly constructed compost pile will drain excess water and not become soggy.

Air

The bacteria and fungus that are in your compost pile need oxygen to live and work. If your pile is too dense or becomes too wet, the air supply inside the pile is cut off and the beneficial organisms die. Decomposition will slow and an offensive odor may arise. To avoid this and speed the process, turn and fluff the pile with the pitch fork. You can also turn the pile by just re-piling it into a new pile. Many compost bins come apart to make it easier to re-pile. You simply move the bin and re-pile your material back into it.

Trouble Shooting Guide

Symptom	Problem	Solution
The pile smells bad	Not enough air; too much moisture	Turn the pile; add dry materials
The pile will not heat up	Not enough moisture	Add water
	Pile size is too small	Collect more material and build to at least 3'x3'x 3'
	Lack of nitrogen-rich material	Mix in fresh manure, grass clippings or fruit/vegetable scraps
	Particle size is too big	Chop or grind materials
The pile attracts rodents, flies or pets	Pile contains bones, meat, fatty or starchy foods	Remove bones, meat & fatty foods; bury vegetative food waste in the center of the pile and cover with leaf & grass materials

Getting to Compost

Time, Temperature and Style

Composting can be done “active” style, requiring more effort, with quick results, or can be done more casually. Both ways will have a positive effect on the environment and produce usable compost. It just depends on how much time you want to spend with your compost and how fast you want the compost.

Active compost piles that have the right blend of nitrogen (greens) and carbon (browns) and are kept moist and fluffed regularly, will heat up to temperatures of 120 - 140 degrees. The high temperature will kill most weed seeds and speed up the decomposition process so that the compost may be ready in three months or less.

Casual compost piles are also an option since most compost will happen even if you just pile on yard and food waste, water sporadically and wait. The pile won't get as hot, so it won't decompose as quickly and may not kill seeds. Casual composting can take several months.

How to Tell When It's Done

Your compost is finished when the original material has been transformed into a uniform, dark brown, crumbly product with a pleasant, earthy aroma. There may be a few chunks of woody material left; these can be screened out and put back into a new pile.

You may want to stop adding to your compost pile after it gets to optimal size and start a new pile so that your first pile can finish decomposing (during which time the temperature will drop).

Give it a Try!

Home composting is best learned by doing. Join us at one of our free classes and get started. Through practice and observation you will find what works best for your situation, and you can modify to suit your needs. There are also a number of books written on backyard composting.

Other Ways to Reduce Organic Waste

In addition to composting, you can also help reduce organic waste by grasscycling (leaving lawn clippings on the grass when you mow) and vermicomposting.

For information on our Vermicomposting class and Make Your Own Worm Bin Workshop, call 951.486.3200 or visit www.rcwaste.org/classes