

How to Start a Compost Pile

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1. Get Supplies

Turning your organic waste into useful mulch is more of a possibility than you may think. To begin the process, get prepared by making sure you have all the right tools and supplies. Our list includes:

A Large Container

Bigger is often better, since heat builds up as you add more materials. However, keep it smaller than 3 feet by 3 feet. Often, you can get old trash cans from your city for a small deposit fee. These are perfect and inexpensive compost containers.

A Wheelbarrow

Get a good one! A wheelbarrow will last for decades and is an essential tool for moving organics, carrying compost, sifting and performing a variety of tasks. Go with either steel or plastic. Steel is heavier duty, but plastic rusts less.

A wheelbarrow is not a place to skimp on size to save cost. Get a full 6-cubic-foot model versus a 4-cubic-foot design. Two-wheeled carts are nice for many uses, but the large wheels may get in the way when using the wheelbarrow to screen compost. Large carts, however, carry more material and are less likely to tip over and spill when making turns.

Water Hoses

Aside from making sure that hoses are long enough to reach the composting area, a good flexible hose is essential. A high quality hose will pay for itself, versus cheap ones that have to be replaced every few years and are prone to leaks.

Sprayers

Use a yellow, plastic “fan-type” sprayer. These do not have too much force and distribute water in a way that saturates evenly. They come with a built-in valve, which is essential to keep water from flooding the composting area when watering layers.

Even the “pistol” type of sprayer can work well, although high-pressure jets tend to deliver too much water in a given area to be very effective for saturating layers of compost.

A Pitchfork

Go with a long-handled, five- or six-tine “hay fork” instead of the short-handled, four-tine “digging fork.” You will be able to move more material per scoop with the hay fork, without as much resistance from the pile. Avoid the extra large 12- or more tine tools that are used for shoveling hay or straw. You will find moist compost to be too heavy to scoop with such a large implement.

Shovels

For digging in compost, a digging fork works, but a good, round digging spade works even better. A sharp-edged spade can break up clumps of soil and compost, helping to blend soil and organic materials together.

Also, go with a medium-sized flat shovel, either long- or short-handled, for scooping up compost, loading a screen, filling the wheelbarrow or spreading compost on the lawn or flower bed.

Poking and Hand Mixing Tools

There are numerous “compost aeration” tools on the market, with some even sold as “mixers.” A popular device has “wings” that are supposed to open up and grab composting material as it is pulled up. Another design is shaped like a small triangle that is designed to be twisted, providing some mixing action.

One bin manufacturer sells a device that is inserted into the side of the bin and used like a lever to raise the material, fluffing it in the process. They all do well in loosening the pile, breaking up mats and allowing air to flow more evenly throughout the bin.

Rebar

Even with a mixing device, an essential tool for every compost pile is a piece of half-inch rebar, about 48-inches long, that is rammed from the top of the pile down to the base, forming air channels. This technique breaks up mats, and enables an aeration grate on the bottom to do its job.

Poking the pile every 6 inches or so makes a world of difference. Rebar can be purchased at any hardware dealer that sells concrete supplies. Some people weld another piece of steel to the top of the bar to form a “T” handle, making it even easier to poke and pull out.

2. Set Up Your Bin

Find a location that works best for you. In the backyard, away from porches and windows, is probably the best place. Though compost piles don't smell (if done correctly), they can attract flies. Having the pile too close to where you hang out might be bothersome. Also, once it is filled, you will not be able to move it, so choose wisely since it is most likely staying where it starts.

If you don't have outside access, you may want to limit your pile to an indoor composting system. These systems come in a variety of sizes and forms and differ from a collection bucket that you use inside to store up organic scraps till you take them out to the larger pile outside. It is important to note the difference between these two containers and buy accordingly:

For **storage of materials indoors**, check out:

- [Three Section Recycle Bin](#)
- [Gaiam Compost Bucket](#)
- [Norpro 94 Stainless-Steel Composter Keeper](#)

For an **indoor composting system**, check out:

- [The Kitchen Composter](#)
- [NatureMill Automatic Kitchen Compost Machine](#)
- [Indoor Kitchen Composter](#)

3. Add to Your Pile

Organic waste is the key to your compost pile's success. This includes waste from your kitchen,

yard and garden. To get everyone involved, put up a list of compostable material in your kitchen to inform others what's in and what's out.

What to Compost:

- Fruit and vegetable scraps
- Lawn clippings including leaves, branches, plants and weeds
- Shredded paper or newspaper
- Straw or hay
- Tea leaves and coffee grounds

What Not to Compost:

- Meat scraps
- Fatty trash
- Vegetable or other cooking oils
- Sawdust or large amounts of wood ashes

Keep in mind that kitchen scraps such as fruits and veggies are typically high in nitrogen. This is needed to help heat up the compost pile and speed up the composting process. To give you an idea, let's break it down by what's most likely in your kitchen:

Breakfast

Apple cores, Banana peels, Burned toast, Coffee grounds, Date pits, Egg shells, Grapefruit rinds, Oatmeal (cooked or raw), Outdated yogurt, Stale or soggy breakfast cereal, Sunday comics, Tea bags and grounds, Soy milk, Watermelon rinds

Lunch

Brown paper bags, Chocolate cookies, Freezer-burned fruit, Fruit salad, Peanut butter sandwiches, Peanut and other nut shells, Pickles, Popcorn, Pumpkin seeds, Stale potato chips

Dinner

Artichoke leaves, Cooked rice, Corncobs, Fish scraps (such as shrimp shells, crab shells and lobster shells), Freezer-burned vegetables, Jell-O, Macaroni and cheese, Moldy cheese, Old pasta, Olive pits, Onion skins, Pie crust, Potato peelings, Produce trimmings, Rhubarb stems, Seaweed and kelp, Spoiled canned fruits and vegetables, Stale bread and bread crusts, Tofu, Tossed salad (no dressings)

Supplies

Cardboard cereal boxes, Expired flower arrangements, Grocery receipts, Shredded cardboard, Matches (paper or wood), Old spices, Paper napkins, Paper towels, Shredded newspapers, Wood chips and ashes, Wooden toothpicks

4. Keep it Healthy

Aerate Your Compost

This can be done in two ways:

1. If you have a composting container with a turning handle, simply rotate your compost on a consistent basis.
2. If your container is not equipped with a turning mechanism, take a pitch fork or a compost aeration tool and mix the compost from top to bottom.

A good rule of thumb is to aerate your compost each time you add something new.

Monitor Your Moisture

A compost pile needs moisture to keep the composting process active, but too much could make it soggy and smelly. Water it often with a garden hose, increasing the amount of water added in the summer months and decreasing in winter.

Keep it Balanced

Too much of any one material will slow down the composting process. Try to keep your materials evenly mixed.

While composting is essentially the same process by which dead plants and animals are slowly reincorporated into their ecosystems, by using the right combination of ingredients, it is possible to speed up this process and create usable compost in about a month's time.

Composting guides generally sort matter into two categories according to what they contribute to the process: green (nitrogen) and brown (carbon). When the two combine in a well-ventilated and lightly moistened pile, the ingredients rapidly begin to heat up and break down.

Green

Most waste that the average household generates falls into the nitrogen-rich "green" category, which is good because two-thirds of your compost should be green matter. Typical green compost includes fruit and vegetable waste, bread, coffee grounds and fresh grass clippings.

Brown

Brown matter, which supplies the carbon fuel necessary for successful decomposition, is usually harder to come by. Brown matter like hay, straw and dried leaves should make up about one-third of your compost material.

5. What About Worms?

Let worms eat your organic waste. They will happily turn it into some of the best fertilizer on earth – worm compost, otherwise known as "worm castings" or "vermicompost." A fascinating, fun and easy way to recycle your organic kitchen wastes, vermiculture:

- Requires very little work
- Produces no offensive odors
- Helps plants thrive

Only a few things are needed to make good worm compost: a bin, bedding, worms and worm food. By following these [steps for worm composting](#), you will learn to make, maintain and use your own worm compost.

6. Prepare For The Seasons

Since heat is a key element to ensuring composting continues to break down, the winter can provide some challenges. Here are some key things to keep in mind during the colder months:

With a little care and attention, you can keep the "burn" going all winter long. Key ingredients to your compost "fire" include:

- **Feed the Fire:** In this case, your food and yard scraps (although in winter you won't be mowing your lawn much), which composters call "greens," will break down quickly because of their high nitrogen content.
- **Keep it Burning:** Drier materials like leaves, dried yard trimmings, straw and hay (called "browns") will break down more slowly and control the "burn" in your pile. In winter months, it is

important to make sure that your pile has plenty of this kind of fuel. Instead of paying for collection, keep your leaves some place dry and add them throughout the winter.

- **Breathing Room:** The bacteria that eat and break down your compost need oxygen to thrive. Without it, they die and anaerobic bacteria takeover, causing your pile to begin to rot. That is not a process you want to start, so be sure that your pile is either turned periodically or that you use hay, wood chips or shredded newspaper to let your pile breathe.
- **Moisture is Key:** OK, so the fire analogy starts to break down at this point, but water is essential to the decomposition process. Compost piles should be moist, and many sources say that you should shoot for “damp sponge” consistency as you wet down the pile. Like a fire, though, too much water will kill your composting process, so monitor your pile accordingly.

On the flip side, autumn has some great benefits for your compost pile. Autumn foliage provides you with a plentiful starter kit by giving a carbon boost to your existing piles. Dried leaves work better and are less likely to clump together (thus making air flow difficult) than freshly fallen or wet leaves, so you may want to bag or cover your collection until it’s brown and crisp.

You can also add the remnants of any decaying garden plants, as long as they are not too thick. You may also want to give your lawn a mow, and then collect the brown leaves and grass together. The two make an excellent brown/green mix that’s ready to go as soon as you rake or bag it.

7. Reap the Rewards

Compost has the unique ability to improve the properties of soils and growing media physically (structurally), chemically (nutritionally) and biologically. Although many equate the benefit of compost use to lush green growth caused by plant-available nitrogen, the real benefits of using compost are long-term and related to its content of living, organic matter. Some of the benefits of using compost include:

- Improving the soil structure, porosity and density, thus creating a better plant root environment.
- Increasing moisture infiltration and permeability of heavy soils, thus reducing erosion and runoff.
- Improving water-holding capacity, thus reducing water loss and leaching in sandy soils.
- Supplying a variety of macro and micronutrients.
- Controlling or suppressing certain soil-borne plant pathogens.
- Supplying significant quantities of organic matter.
- Improving cation exchange capacity (CEC) of soils and growing media, thus improving their ability to hold nutrients for plant use.
- Supplying beneficial micro-organisms to soils and growing media.
- Improving and stabilizing soil pH.
- Binding and degrading specific pollutants.