

## **COMPOSTING—EASY AS 1, 2, 3!**

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Composting is a great way to reduce waste and recycle nutrients into a great soil conditioner for your yard and garden. Adding compost to your garden improves the soil and feeds your plants. While most people agree that composting is a good thing, many don't know how to get started, or think it's a complicated process. But composting doesn't have to be complicated, and now's the time of year to get started.

Composting is a natural process that will happen with or without our help. It involves tiny little microorganisms like bacteria and fungi, along with insects and worms, breaking down dead vegetation and releasing the nutrients that have been stored in the plants.

These tiny insects and microorganisms begin to feed on the plant matter as soon as it is added to the soil or a compost pile. Because of the good food supply, the population of microorganisms increases rapidly, and this population explosion is what causes a compost pile to heat up. As the microorganisms die, they become part of the organic material. The end product of decomposition is rich, dark humus, which is the component of soil that makes it appear dark brown or black.

There are 3 things the microorganisms need to do their work: warmth, water and oxygen. If you can provide these 3 things in your compost pile, you will be producing your own great soil conditioner in no time.

Yes, composting can get complicated and very scientific. You can worry about the carbon and nitrogen levels of the materials you add to your pile, and you can turn it every day, add supplements, and spend a lot of time and effort on your composting! But you can keep it simple and still get good results.

Start with building your pile. You can add any kind of plant material to your pile, such as grass clippings, leaves, pulled weeds (before they go to seed!), sawdust, straw, wood shavings, manures, kitchen vegetable wastes, etc. Any kind of plant material will eventually decompose.

You can just toss these things on your pile as you create them, and eventually, you will have compost. If you want to take it a step further to get compost faster, think in terms of "brown" and "green" materials. For every part of "brown" stuff you use, try to add two parts of "green" stuff! "Brown" stuff includes dried leaves, straw, sawdust, etc. "Green" stuff includes grass clippings, kitchen fruit and vegetable waste, and newly pulled weeds.

You can also throw a shovel full of soil on the pile occasionally to be sure you have a good supply of microorganisms in the pile.

Normal decomposition takes 12 to 18 months, but you can speed it along by chopping the materials into small pieces before adding them to the pile. This can be done by running a lawnmower over the materials, or using a chipper/shredder. And, try for a pile that is a minimum of 3 feet high and 3 feet square for best results.

Do not add any fatty materials, such as leftover buttered vegetables, meat scraps or pet droppings. This can cause offensive odors and attract neighborhood dogs and wildlife.

Once your pile is created, do your best to provide the three important components. The first component, warmth, is pretty much out of our control. Our compost simply isn't going to do much decomposing when it's frozen solid!

The second component, water, is very important. Keep your compost pile moist, but not wet and soggy. Let the rain fall on the compost pile, and between rain showers, dump a bucket of water over the pile or sprinkle it with the hose when you get a chance.

The third component, oxygen, is important because the microorganisms responsible for creating your compost need oxygen to survive. This is where turning the pile comes in. If you can stir the pile at least once a week, your pile will compost much more quickly. Turning the compost pile not only adds oxygen to the center, it also mixes the coarse, dry material from the edges and any new additions into the pile. If you never stir your compost pile, you'll still get compost- it will just take a lot longer.

That's all you really need to know to get started in composting!

Sure, you can put a lot of thought and effort into composting, but if you don't have time for that, you should still have a compost pile. Compost happens, with or without our input. Just pile your vegetative kitchen and yard wastes on a pile, and eventually, you will have compost. The more effort you put into it, the sooner you'll have that compost to add to your soil in your vegetable and flower gardens.

Now's the time to get that compost pile going to provide compost for next summer. Recycle all those good nutrients in your leaves, grass clippings and other organic matter by creating a compost pile in your yard.