



Composting Basics

As we do more to grow our own food and try to do so organically there is nothing as important as completing the cycle of life for your garden by composting the remains of the harvest. A small scale garden can have a small compost system and a large garden can have a larger system but all gardeners should be putting garden debris to good use by composting it. Your soil will thank you for adding organic matter to it on a regular basis and the best source of organic matter is compost.

While your pile can be constructed as simply or complicated as you wish, it does need to be a pile. Composting occurs as the materials you stack decompose. The interior temperature of a pile can reach 130⁰F and should do so to destroy weed seeds and disease organisms. Thermometers are sold for checking your compost pile's temperature and we do recommend them for serious composters.

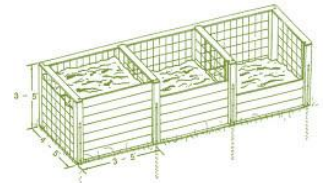
You can find all kinds of diagrams and instructions for making compost bins and you can also find readymade compost bins and tumblers that claim to speed the process up. The simplest bin is made with wire fencing formed into a circle and supported by wooden stakes or rebar. Wire bins can be moved easily but they can be hard to get to for turning. A wire bin near the house or garden to collect debris for later deposit in a larger bin is a good idea if you have space.



compost bin



A wooden slat bin is a more permanent structure and can be easily accessed for turning and harvesting compost. Serious composters often place three bins next to each other. One is used for starting compost, a middle one to turn compost into from the first and a third for another turn later. As you will see, turning your compost is something that hastens decomposition but truthfully if you never turn it, you will still wind up with compost. It will take more time and you will



have to dig for it but it will be there eventually. A three bin system is for type 'A' composters while a simple wire bin is more for folks who don't want good debris to go to waste but will harvest the compost perhaps once a year.

The advice for what to put into your compost pile is pretty straight forward and so is what to NOT put in it.

What to Use: Coffee grounds, egg shells, shrub trimmings smaller than ¼", kitchen waste (vegetable & fruit peels), chemical free lawn clippings, pine needles, sawdust, weeds (avoid noxious weeds such as knapweed or spurge), plant debris, small wood chips.

What to Avoid: Stems thicker than ¼", disease or pest laden materials, chemically treated materials, kitchen meat scraps or grease, cat or dog droppings.

Start your compost pile with a 5-7" layer of small twigs to allow air circulation. Then layer a high nitrogen layer such as fresh manure or grass clippings. Layer on other debris and try not to overwhelm any one layer with too much of one

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thing. Be careful with grass or leaves as they can mat and prevent oxygen from getting to the layer. You want much more than leaves or grass in your compost pile. If you plan to turn and harvest compost quickly it is very important to make layers about only 5-7" thick. Add kitchen debris to any layer anytime.

A compost pile heats in the center and that is where the most decomposition occurs. Turning your pile with a fork so that outer material gets a turn in the hot center makes the process occur much faster. This is the theory behind tumblers. The tumbling of the material keeps the whole pile decomposing. Although you can make compost without the extra effort, turning a pile in summer every 3 days or so can make compost in as little as two weeks. If you have a great deal of material you might consider being an ardent turner to process it quickly. Composting slows down greatly in winter with the colder temperatures so in Montana it is mostly a spring/summer/fall endeavor.

In the dry days of summer be sure to water your pile every day. When you are making layers in a new pile it is a good idea to water each layer generously as you finish it. The microbes that are doing the work need moisture to survive but not too much. Ideally the material in a compost pile should be about the same degree of wetness as a wrung out sponge. During heavy wet spring days, you might cover your compost pile with a tarp to both keep heat in and too much water out.

If you have a multiple bin system, start your compost in bin one. After one week turn the material in bin one into bin two. Start a new pile in bin one. After one more week turn the material in bin two into bin three. At the same time turn the material in bin one into bin two. Start a new pile in bin one. In another week you should have finished compost in bin three. You can stretch this out to two weeks instead of one or even three in the cooler days of spring or fall. Once we get the warmth of summer, one week is about right for a happily cooking pile.

If you have a simpler pile you should try to turn it at least once a month. Remove the wire bin from around the pile, set it up anew and turn the pile into it. For long term piles, you can do this in spring and again in fall. You will end up with compost to harvest either way.

Whether you decide to go into composting in a big way or simply start piling debris up at some point you will be rewarded with rich organic material to add back to your garden. Your garden can nourish you and your soil and both of you will be happier for it!

If you have any further questions about composting, ask the Plant Land Garden Experts for more advice. All of us have compost piles!!

