

## Compost 4 Better Gardens

One of the signs of a true gardener is their delight when a fresh batch of compost is able to be given back to their gardens. This home made source of nature's nutrients in a balanced and ready-to-use form of plant food with a distant advantage. This mixture of organics improves the texture and structure of the soil allowing landscape plants to breathe better, root deeper and use less water than those plants that go without.

For the backyard gardener, composting does not need to be time consuming. Composting can be as simple as a pile of leaves and grass in the corner of the back yard. Another simple way is to drive four metal stakes into the ground and wrap it on three sides with a breathable material like chicken wire. This allows more height to be gained on the pile yet still allows it to breathe from all sides. Of course, there are fancy new machines, barrels and other composting devices on the market that can speed the composting process.

**What to Compost** - Nearly anything is a candidate for a home compost pile. Grass clippings, ground-up leaves, vegetable peelings, egg shells, pine needles, seaweed, hair clippings, coffee grounds and tea bags are all excellent ingredients for your homemade compost. Even finely shredded paper from the home office can be composted. Do not put pet excrement, or any kind of meat products in your compost pile since this will attract

animals, flies, and disease. Variety is the most important ingredient of any home compost pile. The more diverse the pile the faster the composting process and a higher internal temperature.



**When to Turn** - As your compost pile starts to grow, turn it twice a week with a pitchfork, or compost turner. Keep it damp, but not sopping wet. Turning the pile aerates the center and moves less decomposed matter into the middle of the pile. As organisms start to break down the layers, you will notice the center of the pile becomes very hot. This is a sign that your compost is working.

Compost should never smell bad. If an unpleasant odor is present it is probably due to a lack of air or a pile that is staying too wet.

**3 Things** - All compost piles need three things. A mixture of the right organic ingredients, at least a half day of sunshine and the right moisture level. If any of the three are off balance composting will take longer.



If you want your pile to decay quickly you must take the time to chop up large leaves, pine needles, woody stalks and branches. This allows them to break down faster.

**Add Some Soil** - It is a good idea to add a layer of soil over kitchen waste so it doesn't attract pests and animals. Adding organisms from existing soils will also help the pile activate faster. You will know your compost is done when it becomes an earthy chocolate color.

**Compost Starter** - If composting seems slower than you like, especially in the cooler parts of the year, add compost starter. The garden center always carries this natural product which jump starts the environmental processes of composting.

Keep your finished compost covered so it is not exposed to rain and snow or it can lose many of its nutrients. The outer portions of your pile that have not fully decomposed can be added to the next pile as a starter mix.



Composting is a natural part of gardening. You are nurturing and enriching your soil and at the same time recycling your own garden products. Enjoy the process.

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