

# How To



## Create Your Own Compost

### What is composting?

When plants die and rot, their carbon and nitrogen become available to other plants nearby. Composting merely speeds this process and allows the gardener to decide where those nutrients will be used.

### Why compost?

Composting is good for your garden and good for the planet! Every time a gardener removes a plant or a part of a plant from the garden, the nutrients that plant has absorbed go with it. Composting is a way to recycle nutrients in the garden, to put back what has been taken away. Gardeners can reduce or completely cut their need for synthetic fertilizers and minimize landfill waste. Of course, the best reason to have a compost pile is to increase the health of your garden. By adding this "processed" organic material to the soil, you will make your soil richer in nutrients, easier to dig and more able to hold water and nutrients. Better soil grows healthier plants.

### How does one make compost?

A gardener needs five ingredients to make compost: *carbon, nitrogen, microorganisms, oxygen* and *moisture*. Fortunately, these components are all available in the garden. A compost pile can be merely a heap of leaves, weeds, kitchen scraps, manure, lawn clippings and sawdust.. Or, a gardener can tailor a compost pile to her individual requirements and situation. There are a variety of compost bin options available, and many can be easily built at home. Once the gardener has accumulated some garden waste, it is just a matter of speeding the decomposition process. By aerating the compost every couple of weeks during the growing season and adding water during dry times, the gardener may create usable compost within a few months.

Decomposition rates also depend on the mixture of carbon and nitrogen in the compost pile, because microorganisms use carbon for energy and nitrogen to build cells. When plants materials are still green, they usually contain more nitrogen than when they are brown. A good rule of thumb is two parts grass clippings or vegetable waste to one part fallen leaves. Particle size is also a factor in rate of decomposition; the smaller the pieces of garden waste, the faster they will break down into useful compost. When the compost is finished, it is dark and crumbly, and the individual contents are no longer identifiable. Depending on the situation, the gardener may be able to use the end product after a few months, or after a year or two.

### Dos and Don'ts

- **Do** water your compost heap when dry; water allows the vegetable material to break down faster. The ideal level of moisture is the same as that of a wrung-out sponge.
- **Do** turn the contents of your pile. The circulation of air in your compost heap prevents bad odors and allows the plant waste to break down faster.
- **Do** shred or cut up large items before composting. This speeds up decomposition, and the compost can be used sooner.
- **Do** dig in food waste, or cover it with extra soil, in order to foil hungry scavengers. Or, use an enclosed compost bin.
- **Do** make a large compost heap, if your situation permits. Large piles have a greater ability to hold microbial heat, which assists decomposition. Small amounts of sheep or cow manure or soil may also increase the volume of the compost pile.
- **Don't** include meat, dairy products, grease, dog, cat or human feces in the compost pile, especially if the compost is being used on vegetable or fruit crops. The compost will smell bad, and perhaps become a source of infection. You might also attract some unwanted scavengers.
- **Don't** include weed seeds in the compost heap. Many weed seeds can survive even the heat in the compost pile, and will then germinate in your garden. If the weeds haven't ripened yet, they can go into the compost pile.
- **Don't** compost plastic or anything synthetic. These items will not break down.
- **Don't** throw a plant you suspect to be diseased into the compost pile. That disease might remain in the compost and infect other plants in your garden.

