

Backyard Composting is Easy!

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Composting is a great way to recycle our organic “waste” into a beneficial soil amendment for our yards and gardens. Composting at home can also help reduce methane production at landfills. Using the compost in our landscapes helps store carbon in the soil instead of releasing it to the atmosphere. Compost creates healthy soil, reducing or eliminating the need for fertilizers, pesticides and irrigation. And we can reduce our trash by 50 percent or more by composting leaves, grass clippings, garden debris, fruit peels, vegetable scraps, tea bags, coffee grounds, egg shells, paper towels, napkins and even paper bags.

It’s easy to make compost because most of the work is done by soil organisms that convert organic material to humus. Build or purchase a compost bin. Enclosed compost piles keep out pests, hold heat and moisture in, and have a neat appearance. They can be made of wire, wood, pallets, concrete blocks, metal and plastic. Place the bin in a convenient, shady area that can be reached with your hose.

Build your compost pile using three parts “brown” material and one part “green” material. This provides food for the compost organisms in a recipe that will not create odors. “Brown” ingredients include leaves, straw, dried grass clippings, wood chips, sawdust, pine needles, and paper products such as paper towels, napkins, bags, plates, coffee filters, tissue and newspaper. “Green” materials include fresh grass clippings, weeds, fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, tea bags, eggshells, manure, and seaweed. Make sure the materials are damp as you build the pile, especially the “browns.” As you build the pile, sprinkle on several shovelfuls of rich garden soil or finished compost after every 12” of fresh material.

A compost pile that is about three feet square and three feet high will heat up and stay active throughout the winter. Smaller piles may not retain heat, but will still produce compost, though more slowly than larger piles. Once your pile is built, continue to add fresh materials as they become available. Always bury food scraps in the center of the pile under about 6” of leaves, where they will decompose odorlessly. If leaves are in short supply, add plenty of paper towels, napkins and torn up paper bags to provide the necessary carbon, and always bury your food scraps under this material. Add water to your pile if it becomes dry to the touch. The composting organisms need a damp, humid environment to do their work. A plastic cover will help your compost pile retain the moisture you add, but remember to take the cover off when it rains so you won’t need to add water as often.

The compost critters need oxygen, just as we do. Lack of oxygen will slow down the

composting process and cause odors. Turn your pile, fluff it with a hoe or turning tool, or build air passages into the pile to keep your compost pile aerobic and odor-free. Or use a compost bin that allows air to penetrate the pile.

In about three months, the material will start to turn to compost. The material at the bottom of the pile will be ready first. As more time goes by, the level of compost in the pile will rise until it is easy to access just below the surface. You will know your compost is ready to use when it looks like rich, brown soil and no longer resembles the original materials.

Compost benefits all plants, and there are many different ways to use it. Add a handful of compost to each transplant hole when planting seedlings or potted plants. Spread another handful on the surface of the soil around the newly planted seedling, making sure that the compost is not touching the stem or trunk of the plant. This mulch layer will help hold moisture in the soil and add nutrients in a time-release fashion. Spread compost around perennials, shrubs and other existing plantings. If you are planting seeds, apply one-half to three inches of compost and mix it in with the top four inches of soil in the seedbed. To rejuvenate lawns, screen your compost using ½" screening. The mesh trays used for holding and transporting potted plants from nurseries work well as ready-made compost screens. Sprinkle the screened compost on the lawn about ¼" deep. Screened compost is also excellent for reseeding lawns. Sprinkle it ½" deep over the bare spots and distribute new grass seed on top. You can even make excellent potting soil with compost by mixing equal parts compost, sand and loam.

More composting information, including where to get low-cost, rodent-resistant compost bins, is available at the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection's web site, www.mass.gov/dep/recycle/reduce/composti.htm. Compost bin design sheets for building your own bin are available at www.ciwmb.ca.gov/publications/organics/44295054.pdf.

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection has banned disposal of leaves, yard waste and grass clippings with regular trash. Yard waste makes up about 18% of typical household waste and it is more environmentally sound to recycle this material by composting it than to dispose of it in landfills or incinerators. Grass clipping should be left on the lawn, where they will return nutrients to the turf and improve the soil. See the "Don't Trash Grass" brochure for more information at <http://www.mass.gov/dep/recycle/reduce/dtg.htm>.

For residents who do not wish to compost at home, call your community's DPW or Solid Waste/Recycling Coordinator to find out if leaf and yard waste (free of plastic, metal, glass and other contaminants) is accepted at your local Recycling/Transfer Station.

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