

Create Your Own Compost Pile



You can create a compost pile in your backyard or indoors, depending on your available space. Backyard and indoor composting are most suitable for households to convert small quantities of organic materials, such as yard trimmings and food scraps, into compost that can be spread in garden beds, under shrubs, or use it as potting soil for outdoor plants.

Before you begin composting, you should understand the composting process. View what [materials to compost](#) and what [materials not to compost](#) and read up on the [science](#) behind composting about which variables must be controlled during composting.

All composting requires three basic ingredients:

- Browns—Includes materials such as dead leaves, branches, twigs
- Greens—Includes materials such as grass clippings, vegetable waste, fruit scraps, and coffee grounds
- Water

Having the right amount of greens, browns, and water is important for compost development. Ideally, your compost pile should have an equal amount of browns to greens and alternate layers of organic materials of different-size particles. The brown materials provide carbon for your compost and the green materials provide nitrogen, while the water provides moisture to help breakdown the organic matter.

There is no one "right" way to compost, but you may want to follow one of the approaches below:

Backyard Composting Approach One¹

Helpful Composting Tools

- Pitchfork
- Square-point shovel or machete
- Water hose with a spray head



1. Select a dry, shady spot near a water source for your compost pile or bin.
2. Add your brown and green materials as you collect them, making sure larger pieces are chopped or shredded.
3. Moisten dry materials as they are added.
4. Once your compost pile is established, mix grass clippings and green waste into the pile and bury fruit and vegetable waste under 10 inches of compost material.
5. Optional: Cover top of compost with a tarp to keep it moist.
6. When the material at the bottom is dark and rich in color, your compost is ready to use (this is usually occurs in two months to two years).

Backyard Composting Approach Two¹

1. Select a dry, shady spot near a water source for your compost pile or bin.
2. Before you add your brown and green materials, make sure larger pieces are chopped or shredded.
3. Cover your composting area with a 6-inch layer of brown materials.
4. Add a 3-inch layer of green materials and a little soil or finished compost.
5. Lightly mix the two layers above.
6. Top with a 3-inch layer of brown materials, adding water until moist.
7. Turn your compost pile every week or two with a pitchfork to distribute air and moisture. Move the dry materials from the edges into the middle of the pile. Continue this practice until the pile does not re-heat much after turning.

8. Your compost will be ready in one to four months, but let the pile sit for two weeks before using.

Indoor Composting

If you do not have space for an outdoor compost pile, you can compost materials indoors using a special type of bin, which you can buy or make yourself. Remember to tend your pile and keep track of what you throw in. A properly managed compost bin will not attract pests or rodents and will not smell bad. Your compost should be ready in 2 to 5 weeks.

1. Drill 1/2-inch diameter holes in the bottom and sides of a plastic garbage can.
2. Place a brick in the bottom of a larger garbage can, surround the brick with a layer of wood chips or soil, and place the smaller can inside on top of the brick.
3. Wrap insulation around the outer can to keep the compost warm and cover the cans with a lid.

What to Compost - The IN List

- Animal (cow or horse) manure
- Cardboard rolls
- Clean paper
- Coffee grounds and filters
- Cotton rags
- Dryer and vacuum cleaner lint
- Eggshells
- Fireplace ashes
- Fruits and vegetables
- Grass clippings
- Hair and fur
- Hay and straw
- Houseplants
- Leaves
- Nut shells
- Sawdust
- Shredded newspaper
- Tea bags
- Wood chips
- Wool rags
- Yard trimmings

What Not to Compost - The OUT List

Leave Out/Reason Why

- Black walnut tree leaves or twigs
Releases substances that might be harmful to plants
- Coal or charcoal ash
Might contain substances harmful to plants
- Dairy products (e.g., butter, egg yolks, milk, sour cream, yogurt)
Create odor problems and attract pests such as rodents and flies
- Diseased or insect-ridden plants
Diseases or insects might survive and be transferred back to other plants
- Fats, grease, lard, or oils
Create odor problems and attract pests such as rodents and flies
- Meat or fish bones and scraps
Create odor problems and attract pests such as rodents and flies
- Pet wastes (e.g., dog or cat feces, soiled cat litter)
Might contain parasites, bacteria, germs, pathogens, and viruses harmful to humans
- Yard trimmings treated with chemical pesticides
Might kill beneficial composting organisms

A publication of the US Environmental Protection Agency: For more information on composting visit:
<http://www.epa.gov/osw/conserv/rrr/composting/index.htm>