

1. Evaluate the Garden Site

Having a constant supply of fresh compost is ideal for many community garden sites. However, the garden site should meet a few basic requirements in order to host a composting system. Before starting, answer the following questions:

Is there enough space to work with?

Are there gardeners willing to contribute to the compost pile and to help maintain it?

Are there enough materials on site (both brown and green) to have a balanced compost pile?

Are there gardeners who will use the finished product?

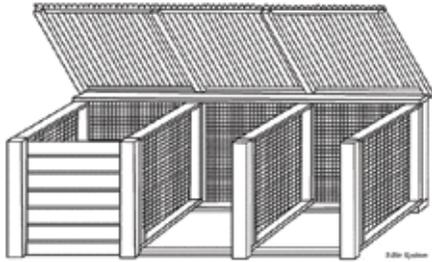
2. Build the System

If the garden community decides that a composting system is a good fit for the site, the next step is to decide on the type of container. Consider the following when choosing composting containers:

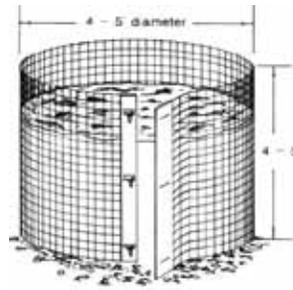
Location. Bins should be placed in a space that receives ample sunlight and is easy to access but far enough away from neighbors and pathways. A minimum of 3 square feet is required.

Size. How much organic material will gardeners be composting? Multiple bins may be necessary for larger sites.

Accessibility. Make sure the compost system is easy for gardeners to turn and take from. Compost tumblers are a great option for gardeners with limited mobility.



Three bin system



Transportable wire mesh bin



Compost tumbler

Tips:

- * Do some research. There are many different types of composting containers and instructions on how to build your own out there; look for models and materials that will both fit your budget and hold up over time.
- * If there are pest and raccoon problems in the neighborhood, choose containers that are lined with wire mesh and have lids, or that are enclosed and off the ground (i.e. compost tumblers).
- * Old wooden pallets work great for building a three-bin-system because they are inexpensive and easy to assemble.

3. Maintain and Manage

Identify 2-3 gardeners to steer a 'Composting Committee' that can work to:

Educate and communicate. The committee should make sure that everyone at the garden knows where to add waste materials, what is allowed in the system, when the compost is ready to be used, and how to use it.

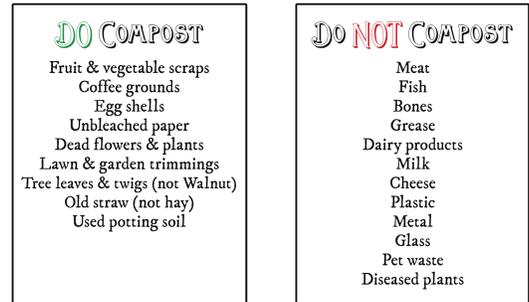
Maintain. Stir compost regularly to speed up the decomposition process (at least once a week is recommended)

Troubleshoot when necessary (i.e. add dry material if the pile is too wet and smelly)

4. Establish ground rules.

Decide on what materials are allowed in the compost bin and whether or not gardeners can add food scraps from home.

Post signage in a visible location so all gardeners know what can and cannot be added.



sample signage

5. Sift

Finished compost should smell a lot like soil and will be a dark, rich brown color. There may still be some pieces of organic waste that did not fully decompose (i.e. fruit pits, eggshells, branches), so sifting may be necessary. The materials sifted out of the compost can be placed in a separate pile so that they can break down further.

Purchase or construct a compost sifter and place it in a location that gardeners can access as needed.

6. Utilize

When compost is finished, there will need to be a system for distributing it. The Composting Committee should consult with fellow gardeners and decide on a fair system for allocating compost.

Finished compost can be used by gardeners...

As a top dress. Sprinkle around the base of yellowing plants to give them a healthy dose of nitrogen.

When transplanting. Add directly to the hole where the seedling is going to be planted.

When direct seeding. Sift finely and use to cover small seeds.

To build up soil. Till into soil about one foot deep at the beginning of the season, before planting.

Composting Resources

Basic composting principles and structures:

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8100.html> (link can be found at growpittsburgh.org under 'Resources')

How to build a compost sifter:

'How to Build a Compost Sifter' worksheet (provided at Composting workshop)

Vermicomposting (composting with worms!)

<http://www.dep.state.pa.us/dep/deputate/airwaste/wm/recycle/Worm/worm1.htm>