



How-To: **CREATING COMPOST**

Creating and adding compost to the soil is one of the foundational aspects of organic gardening. Most food crops require fertile, well-drained soil, and the best way to reach both of these goals is to add compost! So what exactly is compost, and how can you get your hands on some?



EDIBLE SCHOOLYARD
PITTSBURGH GARDENERS
EXAMINE THE COMPOST BIN



AN EDIBLE SCHOOLYARD
PITTSBURGH GARDENER ADDS
COMPOST TO THE PILE

**FINISHED COMPOST
SHOULD
SMELL GOOD,
LIKE FRESH EARTH.**

DEFINITION

In its most basic sense, compost is a soil-like substance. It's made of anything that was once living that has decomposed. But don't let the word "decomposed" intimidate you. When it's ready to use it should smell good, like fresh earth.

BENEFITS OF COMPOST

Compost is full of nutrients, recycled from the once-living materials it contains. Because of the microorganisms that have been working to break down the raw materials, compost also contains living organisms. Therefore, adding compost to your garden introduces nutrients and an entire ecosystem of living organisms that help break down other organic matter in the soil, making even more nutrients available to your plants.

Compost also benefits soil structure. The organic matter that makes up compost acts like a sponge, creating pore spaces where water, air, and nutrients can be held and accessed by plant roots. During wet weather, organic matter in the soil offers aeration. During dry weather, organic matter traps humidity in the soil. Therefore, compost helps plants be more resilient during all types of weather. Also, compost benefits compacted soils, and soils that are too wet or dry.

MAKE YOUR OWN

Making compost can be as simple or as complicated as you want it to be! Here are the basics:

1. Designate a space outdoors where you can deposit your raw materials. It's best to contain the area, either with a commercially made compost bin or with a structure that you build yourself. It's smart to line the structure with hardware cloth, to discourage rodent pests. Place the bin in an area where rain and sun will hit it, and allow the compost to rest on the ground. If you haven't got much room, try a commercially-available composter, designed for small spaces.
2. Put raw materials into the compost bin or area. Remember, anything that was once living can be composted. However, we recommend omitting some items due to chemical or disease concerns, or due to their tendency to draw pest animals.
 - YES: coffee grounds, vegetable and fruit scraps, hair clippings, paper, leaves, sawdust, wood chips, grass clippings, dead plants
 - NO: bones, fats, dairy, pet waste, diseased plants, weeds with seeds, glossy advertisements, grass clippings from treated lawns, sawdust from treated wood.



How-To: CREATING COMPOST



VOLUNTEERS SIDE DRESS CROPS WITH FINISHED COMPOST, AT THE SHILOH PEACE GARDEN



COMPOST BIN SYSTEM AT THE SOUTH SIDE COMMUNITY GARDEN AT BANDI SCHAUM FIELD

3. To maintain an odor-free bin, you'll want a good balance of what we call "green" materials and "brown" materials. Green materials are generally fresh, while brown ones are dried (like dry leaves, newspaper, or straw). Exceptions are human hair and coffee grounds, which are "green" materials.

4. For a good balance, you will need about one part green materials to three parts brown materials. Covering green materials with brown ones every time you add to the pile can be a good method for keeping a tidy and well-balanced bin.

5. Keep your bin at an optimum moisture level. Well-maintained compost should feel like a wrung-out sponge. Water or add brown materials to adjust the dampness.

Troubling

- A stinky bin – Needs more brown material! Add newspaper, wood chips, straw, or dried leaves.
- A bin that does not seem to "do anything" – Needs more "green" materials or more water!

Tips

- The smaller the raw materials, the faster they will turn into compost. Rip up newspaper, and mow leaves before adding to the pile, if possible.
- It can take up to 6 months for compost to be "finished" and ready to add to the garden. Lots of variables affect this number, but generally, larger piles break down faster. Aerating the pile by turning it every week or so will also speed up decomposition. A pile that is not turned will still break down – just more slowly.
- Compost is ready to use when it looks and smells like rich, dark, crumbly soil.

RESOURCES

- Pennsylvania Resources Council (PRC) offers composting classes and provides one compost bin to each registrant.
- Grow Pittsburgh's Garden Resource Center (GRC) provides free compost with a membership.
- Grocery stores like Whole Foods and the East End Food Coop as well as many small nurseries offer small bags of compost.
- Sestili Nursery in Oakland offers bulk compost that they will put in bags for easy hauling.
- AgRecycle makes large deliveries of compost.