



Garden Tips & Techniques: Creating Compost

Adding compost is one of the most basic 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?

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 (and, really, throughout the entire breaking-down process, if it is managed well!) it should smell good, like fresh earth.

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 contains living organisms. Therefore, adding compost to your garden introduces an entire ecosystem of living organisms that help break down other organic matter in the soil, making more nutrients available to your plants.

Compost also benefits soil structure, due to the high amount of organic matter that it adds to the soil. Organic matter acts like a sponge. It creates "pore spaces" where water, air, and nutrients can be held and accessed by plant roots. Therefore, compost is used to benefit compacted soils as well as soils that are too wet or too dry.

How do I make my own compost?

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](#). Place the bin in a place where rain and sun will hit it.
 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 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.
1. **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). An exception is human hair, which is a "green" material. 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.
 2. **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.

Troubleshooting:

- 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.
- Aerating the pile helps the compost to break down more quickly. Turning the pile will help you to get finished compost more quickly. A pile that is not turned will still break down – just more slowly.

Resources:

- Pennsylvania Resources Council (PRC) offers [composting classes](#) and provides one compost bin to each registrant.
- Grocery stores like Whole Foods and the East End Food Coop as well as small nurseries like [The Urban Gardener](#) 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.



Here's the beautiful 3-bin compost system at our Edible Schoolyard at Helen S. Faison Arts Academy in Homewood. Thanks to Courtney Thrall, Senior Garden Educator, for the photo!