



## Creative Garden FYI

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## Make your Own Compost

It is all about the browns and greens of a pile to make it a wonderful bio mass of organisms that do the real work of making old vegetable garden remnants, leaves and other disease, weed-seed free, organic garden debris into garden gold. Bacteria start the process of decay while fungi join the feast. Soon comes in millipedes, beetles and earthworms to join in

A compost pile is easy to build and doesn't require much space. The temperature and size of a pile is the key to proper breakdown of the ingredients. The pile should be at least 3 feet wide, 3 feet across, and 3 feet tall (one cubic yard). This is the minimum size to generate temperatures that can kill weeds and pathogens. Larger piles work even better because their size will increase the temperature in the pile, but keep to about 5 x 5 for easy management.

To build a compost pile, start by clearing off a patch of ground. Choose a spot that's away from trees or fast growing vines – the roots from these plants can grow into the compost pile and suck away nutrients. It's also important to remove any weeds or seeds from the area – if your compost pile fails to get hot enough; the seeds will get mixed into the finished product and may germinate when you use the compost as potting soil or fertilizer. The best ground for a compost pile will be slightly elevated to keep water from ponding in and around the pile. It is also a good idea to locate compost piles away from buildings and garden because they can attract insects and rodents.

The make-up of compost can easily be described as the balance between wet and dry; also known as browns (dry material or carbon) and greens (wet material or nitrogen rich). Moist, high nitrogen or "greens" tend to be the most abundant but cannot be the only things that make up a compost pile. It needs a balance with materials that are dry "browns" like sawdust, straw or dry leaves. The buildup of moisture that makes a pile heavy and compacted doesn't have enough oxygen exchange and food to keep all those tiny microbes happy. Indicators that there is too much moisture or greens are the slime appearance and bad smell. Compost piles should smell earthy, not sour.

All materials in the pile must be moist, but not soaking wet. The mixed material should feel moist, but not be able to squeeze water out of it with your hands. At dry times of the year, you may need to add water. In rainy winter locations, a pile may not heat up unless you cover it to keep out rainwater.

Use a pitchfork to turn open piles or compost bins weekly. Turning improves the porosity of the pile and speeds the biological decay. Turning also mixes material from the outside of the pile into the hot center.

If you want to add to your pile, you can do so throughout the growing season and into the winter months. As you add fresh material, you will need to turn and water your pile more often. Monitoring the temperature and turning whenever the piles temperature dips below 110°F keeps your pile active at its highest level, and you will have the fastest breakdown. This means turning the pile more often. This can be weekly. This mixes fresh material with the older, adds air to the pile and allows you to add water if the material has gotten too dry. With this method, a pile started in the fall, added to and turned the following summer will be ready in late fall of that year or the next spring.

If you are not adding lots of new material, turn and water the pile 5-6 weeks after initial heating. Make sure to turn the outside of the old pile into the center of the new pile. The compost should be ready to use 3 to 4 months later.

The best part about compost is the benefit it gives back to the garden.

Use your compost and mix with the soil to add organic matter, or use it as a top dressing mulch.

Amending soil. Well-decomposed, earthy composts are good soil amendments. They make the soil easier to work and create a better medium for plant growth. You can mix 1 to 3 inches of compost into your soil before you plant a garden, lawn, perennial bed, or cover crop.

Mulches. Composts applied to the soil surface help control weeds, conserve water, and protect the soil from erosion. The best time to apply compost mulches is in early summer, after plants are established and the soil has warmed. Later, mulches can be dug or tilled into the soil. When mulching perennial plantings, choose compost made from woody bulking agents, because it decomposes slowly, resists compaction, and slows weed establishment.