

## Compost--Black Gold for Your Garden



Compost piles are more than just “big heaps of garden stuff.” Just ask any true gardener about the benefits of compost. Chances are they’ll go on and on about the wonderful things “black gold” does for their garden and landscape.

Here’s the best part: Compost happens naturally. We merely intervene to “speed things up” to produce a reusable product in the garden and landscape. Why do we compost?

- ❖ Less waste going to the municipal dump.
- ❖ Increases soil fertility.
- ❖ Environmental responsibility.
- ❖ Saves money on peat moss and removal fees.

### It's as simple as 1-2-3

Composting is not an exact science. If you consider the kinds of ingredients that can be added to a compost pile, no two are identical. Garden refuse, kitchen scraps will vary from gardener to gardener. Here are 5 simple steps to begin composting.

### Step #1

#### Select a location

- ❑ Accessibility to the garden and kitchen. Avoid the out of sight, out of mind technique. If need be, can you get a wheelbarrow to the area; will it be easy to get kitchen scraps to the pile?
- ❑ Is there a nearby water source? You can't always depend on Mother Nature to supply adequate water.
- ❑ Is the area flat and well drained? Avoid areas that are poorly-drained or sloped. Compost on bare earth for best results.

### Step #2

#### Choose your method

Composting is not an expensive hobby that requires lots of fancy equipment, parts or even time. Bins can be purchased “ready-made” or, for the do-it-yourselfer, constructed of various materials including concrete blocks, wire fencing, pallets or just a “big heap.”

Types of composting units:

#### ❖ Pile

A heap of stuff that has no supporting structure around it. No expense here. Create a pile that is, at least, 3' x 3' x 3' for best results.



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### ❖ Pallets

Recycled pallets that are braced together to form a 4 sided, open-top box. Slotted sides allow for air circulation. Put a hinge on one of the pallets so it acts as a door, allowing you access into the pile to turn, collect composted material. You can secure the corners to posts for added stability. No expense if pallets are recycled. Optional: purchased posts



### ❖ Concrete cinder blocks

You can stack the blocks as high as need be. Stagger the blocks so you allow for air circulation through the sides and back of the unit. Cinder block units are three-sided, allowing easy access to turn the pile and collect composted materials. You can use wooden or metal posts to stabilize the unit. If you have ample blocks, you can make several bins in the unit, allowing you to keep fresh, maturing and finished compost separate in bins but within the unit. Expense: cost of buying the cinder blocks and poles; considered a more permanent, long lasting investment.

### ❖ Wire (chicken wire or hardware cloth)

For a longer life span, it's best to use galvanized chicken wire or hardware cloth for this project. You'll need a 10' length of hardware cloth or chicken wire (1/2 to 1 inch wide



openings), heavy wire and 3-4 posts (wooden or metal). Form a circle and secure with wire. Once in place, use metal or wooden posts to anchor the unit. Wire the unit to the posts for stability. Create a door with one of the ends so you'll have easy access into the pile for turning and collecting composted material. You can use small bungee cords to secure the door.

### ❖ Wood bin (single or multiple bin units)

First and foremost - this is not a one-hour project! It requires some carpentry skills and tools that you may not have access to. In addition, these units tend to be larger, so space could become an issue for consideration. For first time composters, it is better to start smaller; you can always graduate to bigger! There is generally more cost in building a wooden unit that is considered permanent.

### ❖ Ready-made composters

If you're not a do-it-yourselfer, your local garden center, nursery or online store should provide endless options. Pre-fabricated units include tumblers, rotating barrels and boxes for the home gardener.



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### Step #3

#### Stick to a balanced diet

Before you add materials to the compost pile, consider what are “healthy” and “not healthy” additions:

What about weeds? Weeds that are laden with weed seeds at the time of composting should be avoided. Also, weeds that are invasive should not be composted. Many resources will state that if the compost heats up to 131<sup>o</sup>F or better, most weed seeds will be killed off. If in doubt, better to not compost them!

Just like with any diets, too much of a good thing is, well, not a good thing. There's something called the C:N ratio that we need to factor in. C:N stands for carbon:nitrogen. In a perfect world, the ratio should be 30 parts carbon to 1 part nitrogen. A 30:1 ratio allows microorganisms to decompose organic material efficiently and quickly. If too much C, decomposition slows down. If too much N, odor problems are likely.

When adding to the pile you need to know what is carbon and what is nitrogen. Simply put, think of carbon as brown materials and nitrogen as green materials that are added to the pile.

- ❖ **Carbon:** leaves, paper, wood chips, saw dust
- ❖ **Nitrogen:** food/kitchen scraps, grass clippings, manure

DO add	DON'T add
Leaves	Fats
Plant debris	Oils
Chopped twigs	Grease
Grass clippings(pesticide free)	Fish scraps
Fruit & vegetable scraps	Meat scraps
Coffee grounds/tea bags	Kitty litter
Egg shells	Human feces
Saw dust	Pet feces
Wood ash	Coal ash
Newspapers (water-based inks)	Pesticide treated grass clippings
Computer, photocopy paper	Pesticide treated plant material

People tend to add grass clippings to a compost pile because they can be abundant during many months of the year. Easy does it with grass clippings! In actuality, grass clippings should never reach the compost pile-- they should be recycled back to the lawn! These clippings return valuable nutrients to the soil for the grass to utilize. Add too many clippings in the compost pile, and you know what you get--an awful odor! No “good neighbor” award for you!

Now that you know what--and what not--to add, you're ready to make compost. Keep in mind the size of the materials you are adding. The smaller the pieces you add, the quicker they will decompose. If you want to add twigs, cut them into smaller pieces with pruning shears or put them through a shredder, if available. Remember, all garden materials will decompose at some point. Consider the following methods:

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### Pile it on

Just add materials as they become available. Some gardeners will just “heap” materials on the pile. In addition, they will throw in a shovel or two of soil to add microorganisms to heat things up. Remember to add water. Materials should be kept moist, not waterlogged for optimum activity in the pile. Air is also very important; do not compact materials that are added to the pile!

### Lasagna

This term of “lasagna” has been used for years by many people. In its simplest sense, it means adding layer upon layer of material to create a desirable environment for compost to happen! Starting at ground level, add a layer of soil, next layer is a high-carbon material, followed by a high-nitrogen material, another layer of soil, another layer of carbon, another layer of nitrogen and so on. Apply water every few layers, or when done. There is no exact recipe for lasagna, as its ingredients will vary from gardener to gardener.

### Step 4

#### Manage the pile

If left alone, the materials you add will eventually compost, thanks to microorganisms that will get the job done. However, most people elect to manage their compost. To do this, you will need to: turn the pile, add moisture, if Mother Nature doesn't; and possibly add soil or finished compost to keep it “cooking” with a dose of micro-organisms. Remember the follow the C:N ratio already covered in this pocket guide.

Aeration is important. Turn the compost to supply necessary air. This is important for keeping odors at bay. You want the materials to decompose aerobically, meaning with the presence of oxygen. If your compost begins to decompose anaerobically, or without oxygen, fermentation will result. The smell of rotting eggs means that you need to turn the pile more frequently!

Temperature also plays a role in composting. Ideally, temperatures should be between 100 -140° F. Above 140° F, beneficial organisms or decomposers can be killed. A soil thermometer can be used to determine readings.

Moisture is needed to keep the pile in check. Contents should be moist, never waterlogged. If Mother Nature doesn't come through, use a hose or watering can to do the job. If you located your composting area too far from a water source, consider relocating if possible. Some people will collect rainwater in buckets to use for wetting down compost. A reference point: The consistency of composting material should be like a wrung-out sponge.

### Step #5

#### Use your black gold

Compost is ready when it is dark and crumbly and has an “earthy” smell to it! Some gardeners will “screen” compost to remove coarse materials. A one-inch screen will catch those materials that didn't decompose or are too coarse. Make your job easier, screen materials over a wheelbarrow or garden area where you intend to use it.

Compost can be used in variety of ways, including:

- ❖ Top dressing for lawns. The microbial action helps to break down thatch layers in grasses. Make sure compost material is fine, fully decomposed. Larger particles or chunks of material can smother turf.
- ❖ It adds nutrients such as N,P,K and key trace elements back to the soil. However, it does NOT take the place of fertilizer.
- ❖ Soil additive or conditioner.
- ❖ In potting soil mixes.

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