



Backyard Composting



What is Composting and Why is Composting Important?

Composting is a natural process by which organic materials decompose. Composting is nature's way of recycling organic material such as leaves, grass clippings, twigs, fruits, and vegetables into a dark, crumbly, earthy-smelling soil conditioner. By concentrating the activity in one place and balancing food, air, and water, compost happens faster.

Remember, composting is just another form of recycling. When you compost, you are tapping into the natural nutrient cycle. In nature, organic waste from plants and animals is recycled by decomposition. Composting is controlling that decomposition to speed it up and produce a stable and odorless material for plants to use.

Organic waste material, like yard clippings and food scraps, can be given "new life" through composting. Finished compost is a wonderful soil amendment that improves texture and adds important nutrients into the soil in your garden, creating healthy, thriving plants. From tomatoes to tulips, compost keeps your garden growing strong! If residents compost their yard and kitchen waste, we can go a long way toward satisfying California's challenging goal of a 75% total reduction in waste.

What can I compost?

Yard waste, such as fallen leaves, grass clippings, weeds, garden plants remnants, and kitchen scraps make excellent compost. However, care must be taken when composting kitchen scraps. Meats, bones, and fatty foods (such as cheese, salad dressing, and leftover cooking oil) do not belong in the bin. Place those items in the garbage.



50% Greens are fresh organic materials that serve as sources of nitrogen. Greens are the primary energy source of the active microorganisms, and are useful as a supplementary source of moisture in the pile. Greens include fresh yard trimmings, fresh grass clippings, fresh or moldy fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee grinds, tea leaves, breads, certain types of manure.



50% Browns are dried or dead organic materials that serve as sources of carbon. Browns are useful for retaining moisture, creating small air pockets, and supporting a more diverse community of decomposers in the pile. Browns include woody materials, dead or dried yard debris, chopped branches and twigs, bark, straw, sawdust, coffee filters, tea bags, shredded paper and paper products.

Air is essential for a sweet, earthy-smelling compost pile. Turning your compost pile regularly will help to inhibit the growth of odor-causing anaerobic bacteria, and will result in faster decomposition.

Water helps ensure efficient processing of organics. Ideally, the pile is kept as moist as a wrung out sponge. Too little moisture will inhibit decomposition, but too much water can produce smelly, anaerobic conditions.

Benefits of Composting

Organic wastes, such as food waste and yard waste, make up 25 to 50% of what people throw away. While you may not be able to compost all of the organic waste you generate, composting can significantly cut down on your overall trash.

When we throw away yard and food waste, it decomposes in a landfill and releases methane gas, a potent greenhouse gas. While most landfills have technology to capture much of this methane, eliminating the gas at its source is even better.

Other benefits of composting include:

- Saves you money by replacing store-bought soil conditioners
- Helps garden and house plants by improving the fertility and health of your soil
- Saves water by helping the soil hold moisture and reducing water runoff
- Benefits the environment by recycling valuable organic resources, reducing transport and processing of materials, and reducing waste to our landfills



Getting Started

Composting can be practiced in any home, apartment, or townhouse. Identify a place in your yard that is out of the way but accessible to deposit yard and food waste. Make sure you can reach this location with a garden hose. There are many ways to construct a compost bin starting from the very simple - a pile on the ground to the fancy store bought composting bin with aeration holes and turning mechanism.

Most people choose to construct a simple box form out of old lumber or pallets with slats spaced apart for adequate ventilation. This is cheap and keeps with the reuse theme.

Now start creating a pile of vegetation. Try for a 2:1 ratio of brown materials (dried leaves, woody material, etc.) and green materials (food scraps, grass, etc.). Add enough water so that the pile is evenly moistened, like a damp sponge. Turn the pile

weekly or when you notice the top layer start to dry out. A good pitchfork is recommended, as it is easier to use than a shovel.

Depending on variables such as a temperature, moisture content, and how often you turn the pile, you could get a rich compost material as soon as a month or as long as a year.

Avoid the Usual Pitfalls

There are times when you may experience an odor emanating from your compost or many flies surrounding it. This is usually due to not immediately covering food waste deposited into the pile. When food waste is added, be sure to turn the pile immediately, or add some fresh leaves or grass on top of it. This will keep the odors and flies away.

Remember, smaller bits of greenwaste decompose faster than large pieces. If you continually have large quantities of greenwaste to compost, you might consider the purchase of a chipper/shredder to grind your greenwaste into finer particles.

Are Worms Ok? After a while, you may notice that worms are starting to populate your compost pile. Good job! That is an indicator that you have a good compost mix going on and the worms are happy to be there. Redworms are great at recycling decomposing organic matter into rich humus. They generate nutrient rich worm castings, which improve soil fertility and structure. You can jump-start your worm populations by purchasing redworms at most local nurseries, bait shops or over the internet.



There are varieties of problems that you may experience while composting. Follow the guide below to solve your problem!

THE PROBLEM	THE CAUSE	THE SOLUTION
Compost pile smells very bad / offensive	Anaerobic conditions (not enough air)	Turn the pile, add more browns to the pile
Pile isn't heating up / getting warm	Pile too small, too dry and/or not enough greens	Add more greens to the pile, add water while turning
Material isn't breaking down quickly	Not enough moisture and/or large material size	Add water, chop materials into smaller pieces
Pile is attracting ants	Pile too dry, food scraps not buried	Add water, bury all food scraps in core of pile Excessive flies and/or rodent foraging
Excessive flies and/or rodent foraging	Food scraps exposed, wrong ingredients	Bury food scraps in core, do not add meat, dairy or oils

What is Grasscycling?

Grasscycling is the natural recycling of grass by leaving clippings on the lawn when mowing. They decompose quickly and release valuable nutrients back into the soil.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND INFORMATION

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) www.epa.gov

The EPA's mission is to protect human health and the environment. They offer a range of helpful tips including composting at home. Be sure to visit the EPA's Composting at Home website as it provides guidance, information, and troubleshooting on composting.

Information courtesy of Kern County Public Works Department kernpublicworks.com

California Department of Resources

Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle) www.calrecycle.ca.gov

CalRecycle brings together the state's recycling and waste management programs and continues a tradition of environmental stewardship. Please be sure to check out CalRecycle's tips on household composting, Home Gardening, and composting bins. CalRecycle also has a great guidance document on building your own composting bin.



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