



# REFERENCE: Composting

**Home-made compost is so valuable to the garden, it's often referred to as 'gardener's gold'.** The rich, dark, earthy qualities of compost improves soil aeration, loosens clay soils, helps sandy soils retain water, improves soil fertility and stimulates healthy root development, among many more garden benefits.

Most gardeners never have enough, and it's easy to begin making your own. Here are the basics:

1. **Begin by picking out a composting site.** Preferably in a shady, level area of your yard. Be sure it is in a convenient area that offers easy access to your kitchen, your garden, and a water source. The best size for a starter compost pile is at least 3 x 3 x 3 feet. You can build a wood, box-like structure as a compost bin, create one out of wire, or purchase a bin.
2. **Alternate layers of carbon rich and nitrogen rich ingredients.** Add a 3" layer of **carbon** rich ingredients such as twigs and wood chips, fallen leaves, kitchen scraps (no meat, oil or grease), shredded newspaper and cardboard (not too much). Moisten this and each subsequent layer of material after adding it to the pile. Next, add a 3" layer of **nitrogen** rich ingredients such as grass clippings, weeds, manure (horse, cow, pig, sheep, goat, chicken, rabbit only) and coffee grounds. For each foot of height add a handful of organic fertilizer and shovelful of finished compost or active garden soil.

**Note: Smaller pieced or shredded materials compost much quicker and are easier to work with.**

3. **You could have compost in 2 months!** Make sure to keep the pile as moist as a well-wrung sponge—damp, but not soggy. For faster results, make sure to turn the pile every few days. For easier turning, use a hay or digging fork.

**Additional Ingredients:** You can enrich your compost even more by adding earthworm castings. If an extra decomposition boost is needed, add a compost activator.

**Other useful compost tools and products:**

- Espoma Bio-Tone Starter Plus** – includes soil microbes; ideal for starting new batches
- Espoma Compost Starter** or **Natural Guard Compost Maker** – to help speed up the process
- Kitchen compost keeper** – perfect for making ingredients convenient to carry to the pile

***See the reverse side for suggested materials for your compost.***

# Compost Material Guide

Type of Material	Usable?	Carbon (C) / Nitrogen (N)	Details
Algae, seaweed and lake moss	YES	N	Good nutrient source.
Ashes from coal or charcoal	NO	n/a	May contain materials bad for plants.
Ashes from untreated, unpainted wood	Careful	Neutral	Small amounts at most. Can make the pile too alkaline and suppress composting.
Beverages, kitchen rinse water	YES	Neutral	Good to moisten the middle of the pile. Remember to not get it overly wet.
Bird, cat and dog droppings	NO	n/a	May contain weed seeds, drugs, or disease organisms.
Cardboard	YES	C	Small, shredded amounts.
Coffee grounds and filters	YES	N	Improves the texture of the finished product. Worms love it!
Cornstalks, corn cobs	YES	C	Best if shredded and mixed well with nitrogen rich materials.
Diseased plants	Careful	N	If pile doesn't get hot enough, it might not kill the organisms.
Dryer lint	NO	n/a	No longer acceptable; synthetic fibers pollute the soil as microplastics
Eggshells	YES	O	Crush first. Slow to decompose.
Fish scraps	NO	n/a	Can attract rodents and cause a stinky pile.
Hair	YES	N	Scatter so it isn't in clumps.
Leaves	YES	C	All leaves are a great ingredient. Oak leaves are acidic, and slow to decompose. Shredding leaves helps them break down faster.
Lime	NO	n/a	Its alkalinity can kill composting action. Avoid.
Manure (horse, cow, pig, sheep, goat, chicken, rabbit)	YES	N	Great source of nitrogen. Knowing their diet can help. Mix with carbon rich materials so it breaks down better.
Meat, fat, grease, oils, bones	NO	n/a	Avoid. Fatty acids will take too long to break down, and draw vermin.
Milk, cheese, yogurt	Careful	Neutral	Put it deep in the pile to avoid attracting animals.
Newspaper	YES	C	No slick, color pages. Shred first.
Untreated sawdust and wood shavings	YES	C	Don't use too much, and no treated woods.
Pine needles and cones	YES	C	Don't overload the pile. Also acidic and decomposes slowly.
Weeds	Careful	N	Dry them out on the pavement, then add later.
Grass sod	Careful	N	Make sure the pile is hot enough, so grass doesn't continue growing.

See a Garden Advisor for quick instruction on getting your compost started right.

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