

Why You Should Compost & How To Start Today

Compost is an incredible transformation of organic material into a rich nutrient source for your plants. Here's what you need to know to start composting.



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Composting is not only a sustainable and earth-friendly practice, but it's the very heartbeat of organic gardening.

If you've not yet experienced composting, it's easy to be skeptical about the big fuss made over what looks like a bunch of dark dirt. I promise you the delightful secrets of compost are plenty, including adding tilth and nutrition, suppressing disease and fighting erosion.

Nothing improves your gardening skills like adding compost to your garden bed.

It's a pretty sweet deal considering Mother Nature does the hardest work, yet we gardeners can take all the credit. To be fair, we have learned some tricks to speed up the process and get you to the garden gold as fast as naturally possible.

What It Does for the Garden

Just as superheroes are known for their signature abilities, compost has an arsenal of superpowers of its own. Here are nine of them.

1. **Soil Structure:** You might already know that compost gives soil nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and other important minerals. But it also adds something else of equal value: tilth. When a soil has good structure, or tilth, it's fluffy, crumbly and aerated. Compost changes the entire structure of the soil, making it easy for plant roots to absorb nutrient provided by decomposed organic matter. Good tilth also offers something for roots to hang onto to, as well.
2. **Season Extension:** Compost improves the average soil structure by transitioning it into a loamy, friable state. Garden soil that's nutritionally rich and has good structure holds heat better than poor or average soil. This means that the soil warms up faster and stays warm longer, which allows the gardener to plant earlier in the spring and grow (or harvest) later into the fall.
3. **Disease Suppressor:** Researchers have found that compost might be yet another line of defense against powdery mildew, potato blight, damping off and other maladies. It battles disease by rendering plant pathogens inactive from the beneficial microorganisms produced through composting.
4. **Time & Money Saver:** Now I have your attention. Using compost as mulch saves time because you're not pulling weeds. Soil that's high in organic content holds as much as 200 percent of its weight in water. That's less time (and money) spent on watering. Composting all the organic waste from your home means you put less in the garbage can, which can decrease your garbage bill. Depending on what you grow, if you regularly add compost to the garden, you might never have to buy fertilizer again ... ever. This saves you time and money.
5. **Water Run-Off Reducer:** Soil that's low in organic matter gets easily washed away by the elements, as it suffers from poor crumb structure. Compost helps fight erosion as it preserves soil structure and keeps the soil under the plants.

6. **pH Buffer:** Because of its biochemical structure, compost (humus) acts as a buffer for soils that might normally fall slightly to one side of acidic or alkaline. In fact, when compost is plentiful, your vegetables and flowers often depend less on pH levels.
7. **Ultimate Eco-Friendly Practice:** Compost is just about as eco-friendly as you can get. Kitchen waste, cardboard, paper and yard or grass clippings make up 2/3 of the garbage tossed out each year. All of these things are ideal composting ingredients. Gardeners purchase expensive soil amendments, bagged mulch and premixed mediums when we can create these amendments for ourselves using our own organic waste. Compost, by its very nature, brings microorganisms that support all wildlife and plants.
8. **Requires No Special Tools:** You don't need a fancy bin, tub or turning equipment to create compost. Making a pile in the corner of your yard works wonderfully. You could also dig a shallow trench alongside your plant rows and simply toss organic waste into it, then fill in the trench. In fact, you could build a compost pile and, once it's ready, level out the top and plant directly into it.
9. **Easy to Apply:** There are no strict rules for adding compost to the garden bed, no directions to follow or warnings to heed. Some people allow their compost pile to break down entirely before they use it, while others steal from the bottom of the pile as compost becomes available. Some wheel the entire pile into the garden bed once it's ready, while others apply it by the scooper-full as a side-dressing to perennials. Still others make it a special ingredient blended it into their potting mix.



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Balance in the Compost Pile

When considering ratio and balance, it's easy to conclude that this composting thing will get complicated. I promise you: It's not complicated in the least.

Mother Nature has handled the natural decomposition of organic matter brilliantly since the beginning of time. With or without us, compost happens.

Because we are aware of the never-ending benefit of compost, we gardeners enjoy speeding things up a bit. All that's necessary to achieve garden nirvana is a basic balance of organic carbon and nitrogen materials, air and moisture.

It's true that, in the end, you want a C:N ratio of about 30:1. However, let me explain why you will pay no attention to this final ratio.

It doesn't make any difference whether a material is considered a "green" (nitrogen) or a "brown" (carbon), because they all have a certain amount of both anyway. None of the organic materials that go into the pile are all carbon or all nitrogen.

So, to attempt to create a compost pile that has an exact 30:1 ratio is futile. Such a plan will drive you mad.

Do this instead: Add about 50 percent green organic matter and 50 percent brown organic matter. Let nature do the rest.

Up your compost game by introducing worms into the mix!

The Hot Compost Pile

The fastest way to get your hands on gorgeous compost is to build a hot or active pile. Just to be clear, a "hot" pile has nothing to do with the temperature outside. The heat comes from the decomposers breaking down the organic matter on the inside.

The ideal temperature for a hot pile is between 113 degrees and 160 degrees Fahrenheit at the pile's core. When the decomposers are working this fast, it's possible to have usable compost in two to three months, depending on the size of your pile.

If you want to know just how hot it gets in there, you can purchase a compost thermometer. I suppose it can be interesting to know the details, but it's not necessary. If you see steam rising from inside the pile when you turn it, you know the decomposers are doing what they do best.

Here's how to build a hot compost pile:

1. Situate it in a bin or inside a wire hoop, or surround it with cinder blocks. Do it any way that you'd like, just leave the bottom open. The fastest way to get your pile going is to let the materials pile up on the bare ground. Microorganisms and other composting critters that are naturally present in the soil are quickly drawn to the pile when organic materials are allowed to contact the earth.
2. The size of the pile should be at least 3 feet wide by 3 feet tall and 3 feet deep. Ideally, 4-by-4 all the way to 6-by-6-by-6 is even better. But don't go for anything larger than that so you don't create an issue with a pile struggling for oxygen.
3. For a pile of organic matter to break down quickly, it's best to add all of the brown and green materials at once and stop adding so that everything breaks down simultaneously. This isn't necessary by any means; it's just the fastest route to uniformly finished compost.
4. Now you need moisture. You need enough moisture in a hot pile to get the microbes to move in and begin the decomposition process. A dry pile is a pile that slows to a crawl. Again, there's no way for exact measurement. Keep it as damp as a wrung-out sponge, and add water as necessary. On the other hand, don't make it sopping wet. This depletes it of oxygen and causes it to become anaerobic. This is like the opposite of hot composting (only it smells bad).
5. Oxygen is the last thing you need to add to your hot compost pile. Oxygen all the way to the center of the pile lets it heat up and the organic materials break down. Air can get into a pile on its own from all sides about 1 to 2 feet deep. You need to help it the rest of the way by aerating or turning the pile once or twice a week. As with watering, don't get too carried away with turning; twice a week is more than enough. Not doing it often enough slows the pile down. But turning too often doesn't allow the bacteria to begin decomposition.

Want your next compost pile to work even faster than the last? After you've harvested the first compost pile for your garden, leave a little compost on the ground. Start your new pile in the same exact spot.

The leftover compost acts an activator to jumpstart the new one.



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Cold Compost Piles

Cold (or passive) compost piles require almost nothing from the gardener once the organic matter is piled up. It's easy to start and takes nothing to maintain.

Basically, you gather up a pile of 50/50 greens and browns, add some moisture and let it do its thing. And it will do its thing. It might take a year, but it will decompose eventually, and you'll have lovely compost.

The one thing that moves a cold compost pile faster is animal manure. My favorite is rabbit manure. But manure from any of the herbivores will do, and they offer a turbo boost into the right direction.

By the way, there is room for compromise when it comes to maintaining compost piles. For example, let's say you started a hot pile but after a month realize you've slowed down to turning the pile once every two weeks.

As long as you don't stop turning (and there's sufficient moisture), it effectively becomes a warm pile. It might not run at full speed, but it isn't completely cold, either.

Along with its other amazing abilities, compost can also compromise. What's not to love?