

Busy Bee - Clean Gardening: Beginner's Guide to Home Composting

Written by: Greg Wiszniewski

Nature has been composting since the beginning of time. Take a walk in any wooded area and look at the ground: Bend over and feel that dark, earthy material called compost. Compost is essentially the accumulation of decomposed organic matter. It can take roughly a thousand years for compost to naturally occur in the wild. Humans have sped this process up over time to use it in agriculture. Today, humans use composting methods to grow healthy backyard gardens.

All About Composting

Compost is a dark and earthy material used to promote a healthy and well-balanced soil environment for plants. It is rich in a variety of nutrients, minerals, and soil organisms. In many cases, gardeners use compost as a suitable replacement for commercial fertilizers. Compost improves the physical and biological properties of soil. It also makes nutrients much more available to plants than fertilizer does. For this reason, many gardeners refer to compost as "black gold."

Composting happens at a slower pace in nature: In fact, it takes about a thousand years to create an inch of humus-rich soil. But today, humans have mastered the art of composting so that it requires only a matter of months to create useable compost. The best part of composting is that people already have all of the necessary ingredients around their home, such as food, raked leaves, and grass clippings.

Compost yields several benefits for gardeners. First, it recycles organic material that would otherwise be thrown away. It improves the physical, chemical, and biological properties of soil. It saves gardeners time, money, and resources. Composting also makes gardening easier. It is good for the environment and introduces micro-organisms back into the soil. Lastly, composting yields more micro-nutrients than commercial fertilizer. This alone makes home composting worthwhile.

- [Worm Composting Basics](#): An educational website teaches the basics of adding worms to any compost pile to speed up the process.
- [Start Composting in Your Backyard](#): Learn how to compost in your own backyard.
- [Composting Yard Waste](#): Find out more about the benefits of composting yard waste.
- [How Composting Works](#): Learn about the basics of the composting process.

How to Start a Compost Pile

There are many different ways to create a compost pile at home. The easiest method requires a designated spot in a dry, shady area. After selecting a spot, collect brown and green materials and add them to the chosen spot. Be sure to chop or shred larger pieces of organic material to make the process faster. Next, moisten the dry materials with a water hose. Add fruit and vegetable waste under ten inches of compost material after establishing the compost pile. Cover the top of the compost pile with a tarp to keep it moist. Turn the compost pile with a shovel to use the material at the bottom of the pile. Only use the material at the bottom of the compost pile if it is dark and rich in color. The entire process usually takes between two months and two years to complete.

- [The Science of Composting](#): Learn about the science of composting, including the purpose of adding micro-organisms and macro-organisms to a compost pile.

- [How to Compost with Worms](#) (PDF): This document teaches how to compost with micro-organisms.
- [How to Compost](#): Follow the steps in this guide to learn how to compost effectively.
- [How to Build a Compost Bin](#): Build a compost bin using the instructions on this page.

What to Put in a Compost Pile

Building a compost pile creates more anxiety and obsession for gardeners than any other activity. It does not need to be a difficult task. In fact, home composting should come naturally to most home gardeners once they know what to put into it to make it worthwhile. When adding ingredients, consider if the material is organic and biodegradable. Add green foliage to a compost pile, such as vegetable scraps, grass clippings, weeds without the seeds, algae, and dead houseplants. Do not add green foliage that came from a chemical-laden lawn. Add brown ingredients such as corn and sunflower stalks, tomato vines, hedge prunings, twigs, leaves, pine needles, and straw. Chicken manure also adds beneficial nutrients to any compost pile.

- [Composting 101](#): This guide teaches the basics of home composting, including the right things to add to a compost pile.
- [Composting Chicken Manure](#): Learn about the benefits of adding chicken manure to a compost pile.

How to Maintain a Compost Pile

Maintaining a compost pile does not require a lot of work. In fact, no-turn composting systems require zero maintenance. Hot-pile composting does require effort to aerate the soil because the micro-organisms use up a lot of oxygen. Cool piles also benefit from occasional turning. Turning refers to mixing a pile with a pitchfork or shovel. Turning a compost pile aerates the soil and cycles the material to the active center. Gardeners should turn a compost pile every three days until it stops heating up. Resist the urge to turn it every day. This disrupts the fungi that keep the pile from heating up completely. Use a compost thermometer to test the temperature of the compost pile. A good hot pile should read 130 degrees Fahrenheit. Turn the pile once the temperature falls to 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

- [Chapter 4: Building and Maintaining a Compost Pile](#): An educational website teaches the necessary steps for building and maintaining a home compost pile.
- [Backyard Composting FAQ](#): This website provides answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) about backyard composting.
- [Preparing and Maintaining a Compost Pile](#): The steps of setting up and maintaining a compost pile are detailed here.
- [Backyard Composting: Recycling a Natural Product](#) (PDF): This document presents all of the necessary information for learning how to start and maintain a compost pile in a backyard.
- [Home Composting](#) (PDF): A Rutgers Cooperative Extension document teaches how to build, maintain, and troubleshoot a compost pile at home.

How to Know When the Compost is Done

Gardeners should look for a dark brown, rich material that looks and smells like a forest floor. This indicates that the compost is finished. Not all of the material decomposes equally: Put any material that has not decomposed back into the pile. Take the finished compost over to the garden area and spread it

out evenly. Compost aerates clay-based soils and helps sandy soils hold moisture. Gardeners can also spread compost around trees and shrubs, use it as mulch, or use it as a tonic for sickly plants. Container gardeners can also use it as a potting mixture.

- [The Art and Science of Composting](#) (PDF): Learn the fine details of the composting process, including knowing when the compost is finished.
- [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\) About Composting](#) (PDF): An educational document attempts to answer questions about composting.
- [Composting at Home](#): The city of St. Louis teaches its residents home composting basics.