



Composting for Beginners

Composting. It's a process that's millions of years old. So it must be working!

By definition, **composting is “a mixture of decomposing and rotting debris which can add fertilizing elements back into the soil.”**

The process can be described as nature's way of recycling:

- A seed is planted
- The seed takes nutrients from the soil
- A plant grows from the seed
- The plant produces more seed
- The plant dies
- Then it decomposes and returns nutrients to the soil

The materials that can go into a compost pile include lawn debris (leaves and small twigs) for a carbon source, *dry* grass clippings, manure, kitchen scraps or other nitrogen source, water, oxygen and a small portion of soil or inoculant. The kitchen scraps should also be dry. It's a good idea to freeze them before adding them to the compost pile. Also, remember that using animal by-products (grease, cat or dog droppings) may cause unpleasant odors.

Size: 3ft x 3ft x 3ft is the minimum size to create heat in the pile, necessary for decomposition. Work with 4 to 6 inch layers. You may choose to construct a pen to contain the compost, but a loose pile can work just as well.

If you're going to construct a compost pen, you can use wire mesh, wood pallets, lumber or concrete blocks. If you use concrete blocks, stack them so that the holes “point out”, creating airflow.

Compost piles can be placed almost anywhere except where water will run on, over, or under it. Keep the pile moist, but not wet—about like a wrung-out sponge. It's not necessary to cover the pile because rain should run off, if the top is kept slightly “mounded”.

When all of the ingredients are used, the microbes start to work. In 2 to 3 days the pile will heat up to about 140° to 160° F. It will stay at that temperature for about 10 days. This action kills the weeds and “sterilizes” the compost.

If you want “quick (hot) compost”, shred the contents with a lawn mower or shredder. When the pile begins to cool down, turn it. Turning it 3 times will produce usable compost in 5 to 6 weeks. If you do nothing but pile it up and leave it, it will be compost in a couple of years. (Actually, you'll find that making compost is pretty hard to screw up!)

Now that you've made compost, where can you use it? Use it in any soil where you would normally use fertilizer, including containers, gardens, lawns, etc. Use it where you want to loosen the soil, or where you need to increase your soil's ability to retain moisture. Our soil is about 1% organic matter. 3 to 5% would be much better.

What is the difference between compost and mulch? They are not the same thing. Natural mulch is chopped up trees, limbs and other brush. The size of the chunks is much larger. Natural mulch stays where it is applied and doesn't wash away. Other mulching materials include lava rock, white rock, pine bark and plastic.

The source for this GVST Gardening Guide is Dr. Tom Harris, GVST Volunteer and Master Gardener. Tom writes a weekly gardening column for the Boerne Star newspaper.