

Chicago Department of Environment's Composting Tips

What is Compost, Anyway?

Compost is a dark, crumbly, sweet-smelling substance made up of partly decomposed organic matter. Decomposition is the natural process by which important nutrients locked inside plants and animals are recycled back into the soil. Good compost is rich in nitrogen and carbon -- two things that plants need to grow strong and healthy.

10 Steps to Better Composting

1. Pick a shady, well drained spot in your yard.
2. Remove any grass from where you plan to put the composter so that microbes, beetles, and earthworms can climb up into the bin. They're the ones doing all the work!
3. Set up your compost bin.
4. Gather as much of a variety of compost ingredients as you can. Variety is a key to composting success.
5. Chop or grind larger compost ingredients. This will speed up the process.
6. Build your compost pile in layers. Start with fresh grass clippings, dried leaves, and food scraps. A good rule of measurement is 2 parts grass clippings to 1 part brown leaves.
7. Water each layer so that it is "sponge damp" and bury food scraps in the center of the pile so that the neighborhood wildlife isn't tempted to dig in.
8. Turn the pile with a garden fork a couple of times a month. This will help keep a perfect composting temperature of between 130 degrees and 160 degrees F.
9. Be patient. It takes as little as two weeks or as long as several months to "cook." The compost will be ready when it is dark brown, crumbly and earthy-smelling.
10. Remove finished compost from the bottom of the bin. Add it to your garden and watch everything grow!

Materials for Better Composting

Do Compost:

- leaves, twigs and grass clippings
- fruit and vegetable peelings
- bread
- eggshells
- coffee grounds and tea leaves
- mulch and wood chips
- wood ashes
- sawdust and shavings
- garden waste and weeds
- shredded paper



Do Not Compost:

- meat
- bones
- oil or fat
- dairy products
- dog or cat feces
- colored newspapers or magazines
- plastics
- charcoal ashes
- plants or grass clippings that have been treated with chemicals
- diseased or insect-infected plants
- sawdust from plywood and pressure treated wood



Uses for Your Newly-Baked Compost

It's as easy as 1-2-3:

1. Use finished compost from the bottom of the bin.
2. Cultivate the soil around the plants you wish to enrich with compost.
3. Spread the compost in a layer 1 to 3 inches thick around the plants.

Remember...you can use compost for trees and indoor plants, too. Just be careful not to pile it against tree trunks -- it can rot the bark and kill the tree.

When Compost Goes Rotten

What's The Problem?

- **Foul odor:**
The reason could be that there is not enough air, or too much moisture. You can solve this problem by turning the pile and adding dry material if pile is too wet.
- **Center of pile is dry:**
Reason could be that there is not enough water. You can solve this problem by moistening and turning the pile.
- **Warm and damp only in the middle:**
The reason could be that the pile is too small. Solve this problem by adding more materials.

- **Pile is damp but won't heat up:**
The reason for this might be lack of nitrogen or not enough air. To solve this problem, add grass clippings or other nitrogen sources.

Composting Workshops

To see composting in action, Chicago residents are encouraged to visit the North Park Village Nature Center at 5801 North Pulaski Road. The Nature Center has a demonstration site that depicts the composting process through the various stages of decomposition. City residents who would like to learn the specifics of composting organic waste can attend one of the North Park Village Nature Center's compost workshops. For workshop dates and times, call the Nature Center at (312) 744-5472.