



## Compost Myth Busters

*Think you know everything about outdoor composting? Think again. Below are some common outdoor composting myths and the truths behind the tales.*

### **Myth: Composting will attract rodents.**

**Truth:** Composting will not attract rodents as long you keep meat, dairy, grease, grains and pet waste out. Be sure to use a rodent resistant bin (with a lid, base, and no holes or gaps larger than ¼ inch). Composting in this way can actually reduce rodent problems, because your garbage will contain fewer fruits and vegetables, and those materials will break down without odor in your compost bin. The City of Chicago requires the use of a rodent resistant bin for composting in the city.

### **Myth: I can only compost in warmer months.**

**Truth:** Composting happens at all temperatures—it just goes very slowly in the cold. Save your fall leaves and each time you add a layer of fruit and vegetable trimmings, cover it with a layer of leaves. In the spring, mix it up, and it will break down more quickly.

### **Myth: You need exact proportions.**

**Truth:** The typical picture of a compost bin shows nice neat layers, but composting is not an exact science. Layers are not as important as a 50:50 mix of brown fibrous carbon material (dead leaves) and green nitrogen material (e.g. food scraps). A way to maintain balance is to throw some leaves or grass clippings over your kitchen scraps. Shredding or dicing large kitchen scraps will help speed up the process. But don't stress out too much about proportions - compost eventually happens.

### **Myth: Composting is too much work.**

**Truth:** Actually, composting takes little effort on your part. First, you decide what type of compost bin to use. Fortunately, there is a composter for every conceivable dwelling. The initial set-up requires the most work but after that, composting is pretty low maintenance. You can turn your compost frequently to give it oxygen and accelerate the process or you can let it sit for several weeks. Turning also helps reduce flies.

### **Myth: Compost smells.**

**Truth:** Stinky compost is unhappy compost. Normal compost should smell like rich earth. Unpleasant compost odors are caused by lack of oxygen or too much water. Limited oxygen allows anaerobic bacteria to thrive, and this is the bacteria that smells. When there is enough oxygen present, aerobic bacteria prevail, preventing bad smells. Keeping the compost loose and occasionally turning the pile adds oxygen and helps aerobic bacteria do their thing. It's the same deal with too much water. Composts need to be moist but not mushy. Mushy means you won't build up enough heat to get the bacteria working. If you are getting too much rainwater into the compost, place a tarp over the lid to keep it dry.

### **Myth: Black dirt or topsoil is better than compost.**

**Truth:** Organic, fertile soils are living ecosystems that took thousands of years to become fertile by nature's process of annual mulching. At first, the soils are rich in organic matter and are highly fertile. However, after depletion (a process that can occur within a few years or generations), it will take thousands of years to enrich the topsoil with organic matter again. We can accelerate this process of building up soil fertility by tilling in compost, creating living soils in a fraction of the time. Enrich the soil you already have with compost or remove the old soil and replace it with soil mixed with compost.

Sources: *Composting Myths* – [www.greenlivingonline.com/article/five-composting-myths](http://www.greenlivingonline.com/article/five-composting-myths)

*Common Composting Myths* – [www.earth911.com/recycling/garden/composting/13-common-myths-of-composting/](http://www.earth911.com/recycling/garden/composting/13-common-myths-of-composting/)



## Know Your Compost Facts

***Composting is an easy way to recycle waste into a nutritious soil conditioner. Did you know ...***

- ❖ Composting is the **biological decomposition** of food scraps and yard waste into a nutrient-rich compost. The process occurs naturally, but can be accelerated and improved by controlling environmental factors.
- ❖ People may wonder, "why bother with composting if everything organic decomposes eventually?" Composting in a controlled environment typically provides a more uniform product with a **better balance of nutrients**. It turns your food scraps and yard waste into a vital resource for yard and garden throughout the year.
- ❖ With a bin, composters have more control over adding and mixing the amount of **carbon and nitrogen rich materials** used to make the end product. In addition, a properly controlled composting environment can ensure production of high temperatures needed for killing weed seeds, diseased plant tissue, and pathogenic organisms.
- ❖ According to the U.S. EPA, food scraps and yard waste account for nearly **30% of all garbage** generated nationally each year. Once this "useless" material is taken away to a landfill, it really becomes useless. Enclosed in an oxygen-limited environment, garbage degrades very slowly. Landfills must be monitored to make sure gases such as methane do not build up inside, and to make sure groundwater does not become contaminated from landfill liquids. In addition, many landfills are nearing their maximum capacity, and in the near future will need to be closed.
- ❖ Composting yard materials has many landscape benefits. Nutrients that otherwise are removed when trimmings are bagged can be placed back into the **nutrient cycle**, lessening the need for fertilizers. When added to the soil, the nutrients present in compost are released slowly, so they are less likely to leach out of the root zone, as compared to regular fertilizer. Soil structure is improved by the addition of organic matter.



Sources: Ullinois Extension, *Composting for Homeowners* – <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/homecompost/intro.html>  
U.S. EPA, *Food Waste* – <http://www.epa.gov/osw/conserves/materials/organics/food/food-basic.htm>

### ***What resources are available in Chicago?***

- ❖ The City of Chicago Department of Environment runs the Sustainable Backyard Program that hosts educational workshops across the city and provides rebates for rain barrels, compost bins, trees, and native plants during the growing season. When the program is not in session, you are still welcome to purchase any of these from your local garden center or hardware store and save your receipt to qualify for the next round of rebates. Visit [www.cityofchicago.org/rainbarrel](http://www.cityofchicago.org/rainbarrel) for more information and workshop dates..
- ❖ The University of Illinois Extension offers in-depth information on home composting. Find more information at <http://urbanext.illinois.edu/homecomposting>.