

Why Compost?

One of the benefits of home-based composting is to reduce garbage and other waste. Reducing the bags of garbage we put curbside for the weekly pickup decreases the waste that the City must truck to the County landfill. This, in turn, decreases the City's "tipping" fee that it pays for each pound of garbage dumped (or tipped) at the landfill.

Although we all like to save money, most gardeners are motivated by the end product—a nutrient-rich amendment that improves the texture and fertility of the soil. They care more about how the compost will help their plants.

For example:

- It helps the soil to "breathe" by providing oxygen to plant roots.
- It helps plants retain water so they don't dry out as easily.

In addition to using compost to nurture our outside flower and vegetable gardens, we can use compost as potting soil for houseplants. We also can spread compost on our lawn and under trees and shrubs.

Cold Composting is Easy

Compost is "a remarkable substance resulting from the decay of organic material...and other things we otherwise would just throw away." (More wise words and directions about compost can be found at www.the-compost-gardener.com.)

Making the perfect compost—or what the experts call "hot compost" can be a somewhat scientific procedure. As described at www.vegetablegardener.com:

Hot composting requires a system that raises temperatures high enough and for a long enough time to destroy weed seeds and plant pathogens. This requires some work on the part of the gardener, either up front with careful layering of materials, or later on with maintenance of pile temperatures.

However, most gardeners prefer a cold-composting system, where organic waste is simply dumped into a pile in their backyards to decompose. As the *vegetablegardener* website says, the gardener just waits for the "unseen army of microscopic critters to do their work."



Just a Little Science

Although cold-composting is easy, it's still essential to put the right ratio of nitrogen and carbon products into the pile. The basic ideas are provided below, but those who want more information about compost ingredients can find it at <http://www.organicgardening.com/learn-and-grow/compost-ingredients>.

High-nitrogen "greens" include the following: fruit and vegetable scraps; grass clippings and weeds that haven't gone to seed; bread and baked goods, rice, pasta, and grains; tea leaves and bags; coffee grounds and filters; and egg shells.

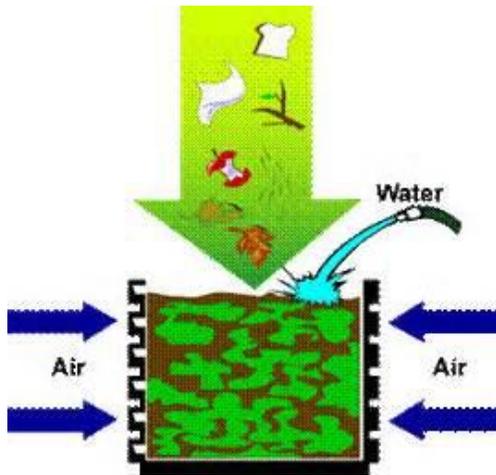
High-carbon "browns" include the following: fall leaves, dead dried plants, shredded paper, brush broken into small pieces.

Do not put the following in your compost pile: meat, chicken, fish and shellfish, fat, grease, oils, all dairy products, weeds that have gone to seed, diseased plants, animal waste, and charcoal ash.

There are two other ingredients that are important in making compost: air and water.

Air: Make your compost pile no more than 5 feet high by 5 feet wide so that air can penetrate to the center of it. Layering the pile with coarse materials such as brush and twigs will help the air circulate. To accelerate the composting process, use a pitchfork or shovel to turn the pile.

Water: Your pile should be damp, often described as “about as moist as a wrung-out sponge.” If it feels too wet, add dry brown material. If it’s too dry, add some water.



Location, Location, Location

Many people just throw their organic matter into a heap in a corner of their yard and call it a compost pile. Others prefer a plastic or wooden structure,

which does offer certain benefits, such as retaining moisture in the pile, containing odors, and keeping out animals.

Whether it's a pile or a structure, try to find a spot on bare ground (and convenient for you) that gets a fair amount of shade, so the sun doesn't dry out your compost ingredients during the hot summer months.

Be Patient

Compost doesn't happen overnight. From start to end, the process can take 6 to 24 months.

You'll know when it's ready when individual materials can no longer be identified and the pile resembles rich dark soil (often called "black gold"). This nutrient-rich soil will smell sweet, woody, and earthy—just the kind of smells our plants love!



This brochure was prepared for College Park residents as a volunteer project of the Committee for a Better Environment (CBE). For information about CBE and its activities, please visit www.collegeparkmd.gov/. Check under the tab "Boards and Commissions." September 2014