

Compost has humble origins – made from yard clippings, manure from the barnyard, eggshells and vegetable scraps from the kitchen. By letting those common materials decay together in a pile, and then tilling in the results, we give back to the soil the minerals and other nutrients it originally provided.

To set up a compost pile, follow these four easy steps:

- 1. Location of pile:** Look for a location that is level, but well drained and choose a spot in the sun to maximize the heat essential in the composting process. Your compost pile may give off odors from time to time so try to choose a location away from the house. A convenient spot may be the center of your garden, where the collection of materials is most accessible.
- 2. Type of structure:** Use whatever is handy in constructing your compost bin. Materials suitable include lumber, chicken wire, concrete blocks or bricks, bales of hay or straw, or railroad ties. Use some type of cover to keep rain from soaking the pile, which slows the composting process. You can use a free-standing pile, or if your yard is small try a ready-made composter which you can feed from the top and take compost from the bottom. Be sure your structure has openings to allow for aeration as bacteria and fungi need oxygen to do their job. It is a good idea to have two bins, one for composting now, the other to hold the finished product. This way there is a continual supply of compost ready to use.
- 3. What to use:** The general rule of composting is to use anything that was once alive. However, it is not recommended to use meats or fats as they compose very slowly and smell bad in the process. Ingredients for composting have endless possibilities – anything from vegetable parings and eggshells to wilted weeds or even hair clippings make great compost. Wood chips and needles from coniferous trees may not be suitable because of their acidity and resin content that make them hard to compost.

The decomposition process will work best on smaller pieces of material. If you have large pieces such as corn stalks, you may want to run these through a shredder first. Layer course materials with finer ones to help in aeration. Use course materials as your base layer. Follow with layers of manure or grass clippings, then a layer of garden soil, more rough material, clippings, and so on. If you add dry materials, sprinkle with water as you build the pile. A good rule of thumb is to remember to alternate layers of “greens” and “browns”. For maximum decomposition, repeat this sequence until the pile is 4 or 5 feet high. Keep the pile covered until it is finished.

Maintaining your compost pile:

As you are building your compost pile, make sure that it is at least 3 feet square and 3 feet high. This is the minimum size needed to sustain the required biological reactions. If the pile is too large (over 5 feet high), it will compact, squeezing out air and slowing down the decomposing process. A well-constructed pile will heat up to 130 degrees within 3 or 4 days. To get usable compost in the least amount of time, turn the pile with a fork every three or four days. By turning the pile, you are moving the fully composted materials out of the center and replacing them with cooler, partially composted materials from the sides. After the pile has heated up in the first few days, it begins to cool. Turning the pile starts the heating up process again. Composting is complete when the pile no longer heats up after turning.