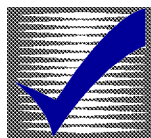




## HOW-TO BOOKLET #3144

# HOME COMPOSTING



### TOOL & MATERIAL CHECKLIST

- Compost Bin
- Organic matter
- Alfalfa pellets, meal
- Compost Turning Tool or Garden Fork
- Plywood
- Wire Mesh
- Garden Hose

*Read This Entire How-To Booklet For Specific Tools and Materials Not Noted in The Basics Listed Above*

Does your trash hauler refuse or charge extra to collect your:

-  Leaves
-  Weeds
-  Prunings
-  Grass clippings

What are you going to do with them?

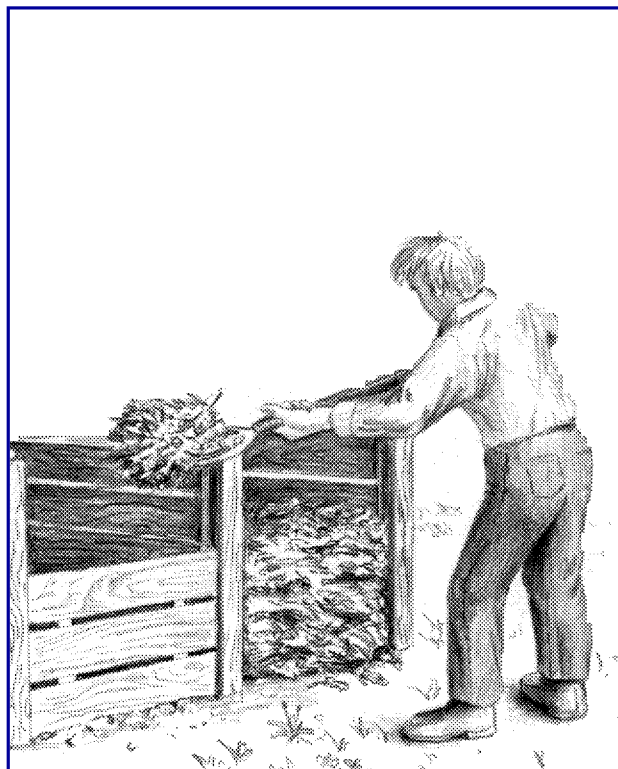
Compost them!

Composting is nature's way of recycling your yard and kitchen waste...and it's EASY!

Even if your municipality hasn't started refusing these items, you can help reduce the pressure on our quickly filling landfills and help the environment by composting.

### HOW COMPOSTING WORKS

Backyard composting works the same way that the forest floor works in nature. Leaves, plants, animal droppings, and even whole trees fall to the ground and are slowly decomposed or digested by billions of tiny organisms. The same tiny organisms will chew up your yard waste if you give them the right food mixture and enough water and air. The end product is a black, crumbly, earthy-smelling material called humus or compost. Compost is an excellent soil conditioner and fertilizer, it gets rid of waste materials, and it's free for the making.

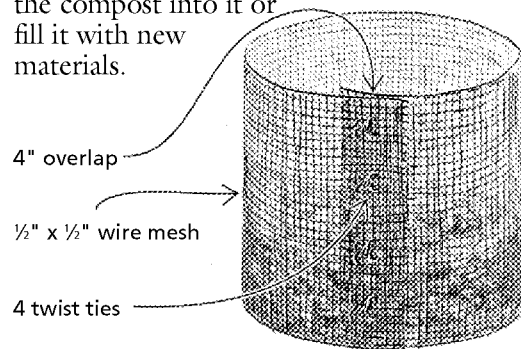


## SIMPLE FENCING WIRE RING

Here is a very simple compost bin you can make.

### Materials:

- 🏠 1- 8' x 3' piece of 1/2" x 1/2" galvanized wire hardware cloth
  - 🏠 4 heavy duty wire twist ties
  - 🏠 2- 3' x 3' pieces of 1/2" x 1/2" galvanized wire (optional)
  - 🏠 hardware cloth or sturdy plywood (for rodent-resistant bin bottom)
- 1 Form the wire into a cylinder by overlapping about 4" of the ends and securing them with the twist ties.
  - 2 Place the cylinder directly on the soil. (If you live in an urban area, place the cylinder on a paved surface or on a square of hardware cloth or plywood. Then cover the bin with another square of hardware cloth or plywood to keep out nesting or foraging rodents.)
  - 3 Add your compostable materials. When you are ready to turn or use your compost, lift off the cylinder or undo the twist ties and peel off the bin. Then set the cylinder up in a new spot and turn the compost into it or fill it with new materials.



## WHAT TO PUT IN COMPOST

### Dry, brown stuff to add

- Fallen leaves
- Old, dry weeds
- Old, dry plant stems
- Chopped twigs and prunings
- Sawdust
- Shredded newspapers and cardboard
- Used paper napkins, paper towels, and shredded plain paper plates
- Hay and straw
- Wood ashes (cold)
- Wood chips

### Moist, green stuff to add

- Fresh weeds
- Fresh plants and green prunings
- Vegetable and fruit peels and trimmings, coffee grounds, eggshells, and tea bags
- Grass clippings—though these are usually best left on the lawn
- Alfalfa hay, pellets, or meal
- Manure or animal cage cleanings (except cat or dog droppings) and urine
- Hair
- Seaweed

### Do Not Add

- Problem weeds that spread by roots
- Weeds that have gone to seed
- Meat, fish, or any food scraps that contain large amounts of fat or oil
- Large branches
- Pressure-treated wood scraps
- Dog, cat, or human feces (they may contain disease-causing organisms)
- Barbecue or coal ashes
- Glossy paper
- Things that were never alive: plastic, glass, metal, stone, etc.
- Compost activators—the experts say they just aren't necessary

## CHOOSING AND PLACING YOUR COMPOST BINS

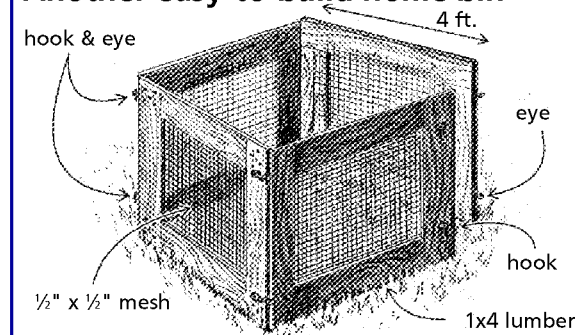
The simplest way to make compost is to pile your yard waste in an out-of-the-way place and forget about it for a year or so. This is usually not the best method—unless you have lots of land and no neighbors.

Most homeowners make compost in some sort of container or bin. You can make your own bin from wood, wire fencing, concrete blocks, or plastic lumber. Or, you can choose to buy from the wide variety of ready-made bins and tumblers. Tumblers mix and turn the compost without you having to touch it, and they can speed up the process.

Every bin or tumbler makes the same end product—compost, so choose or build a model that suits your budget and lifestyle. You want one that is at least 3 feet wide, 3 feet long, and 3 feet high. Smaller containers may not work very well. If you have lots of material to compost, you can make your bin larger, up to 5 feet high by 5 feet wide, and as long as you need it.

It's best to have at least two bins so that you can put fresh materials into one while the other is composting. Many gardeners who compost swear by three bins.

## Another easy-to-build home bin



Put your bins where you can get to them readily and have room to work around them. It helps if you can get a hose to the site to moisten the compost. Near your vegetable garden is a good place if you have room. The side of your yard or against a brick or concrete building also works. In hot climates, find a shady spot; in moderate climates a partly shady site is fine. If you have cool summers, pick a sunny site if you can spare it. You may wish to screen the bins from view with a hedge or vine-covered fence.

## ADDING RAW MATERIALS

Filling your bin right is easy. Just remember these three simple rules:

- 🏠 Add equal amounts of dry, brown stuff and moist, green stuff. (See “What to Put in Compost”.)
- 🏠 Chop, cut, or tear everything up into little pieces (1 inch long is fine).
- 🏠 Add just enough water to make the dry stuff moist—but not soggy.

Pile raw materials loosely into your bin, spreading them out evenly and all the way to the edges. Add a thin layer (an inch or two) of green stuff, then an equal layer of brown stuff, and then sprinkle it with water. You want your pile to be as moist as a wrung-out sponge. Keep adding equal amounts of green stuff and brown stuff and watering until you’ve added all you have that day.

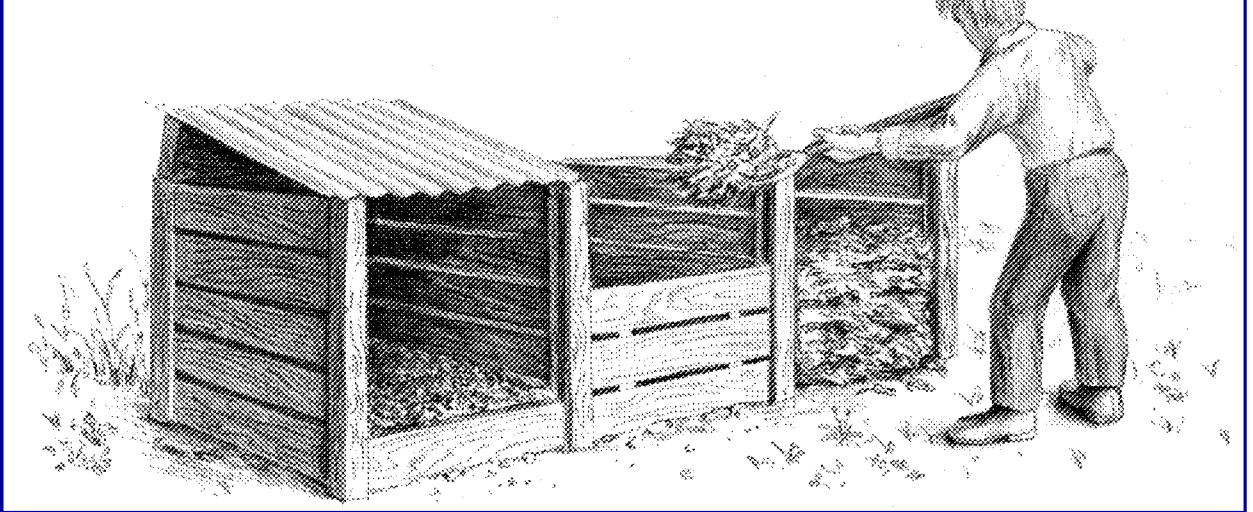
Certain seasons of the year you will have either lots of green stuff (summer weeds) and very little brown stuff, or lots of brown stuff (fall leaves) and very little green stuff. Some homeowners stockpile the dry, brown stuff in a tarp-covered pile or in clean garbage cans until they get green stuff to mix it with. Shredded newspapers are a good year-round source of brown stuff to match with your extra green stuff. In fall, buy a bag of alfalfa meal or alfalfa pellets for super-concentrated green stuff. Just a few handfuls sprinkled over every well-watered layer of fallen leaves will get your pile off and working.

### Special Tip

When you have just kitchen scraps to add, dig a 6-inch-deep hole in the center of the top of the pile, dump them in, cover them with a handful of garden soil, and close the hole back up. This will help prevent attracting pests.

Continue to add materials in alternate layers until your bin is full. Then start filling your second bin with new raw materials.

## Rebuilding pile in 3-bin unit



## CARING FOR COMPOST

Once you have a foot or so of mixed green and brown stuff in your bin, the material will start to compost. You will know this is happening when the pile starts to heat up and eventually shrink. You can continue to add layers of new materials on top, or you can mix the new materials right into the pile (remember the half-brown, half-green rule) as you get them.

Your compost pile needs to stay moist, not dry or soggy, to work. In dry climates you will need to add water as needed. You may also want to line your bin with plastic to reduce moisture loss. In rainy climates you will need to cover your pile to keep the rain off it. A sheet of plastic or a hinged plywood lid will do the job.

Compost produces its own heat, but in freezing weather it may lose heat faster than it can make it. Cover your pile with clear plastic to help collect and hold the sun’s heat. You can also insulate the

sides and top of your bin with bales of straw or sheets of rigid insulation to keep it cooking through the winter. Or you can let it freeze and wait for spring to start it going again.

Once your bin is full you have two management choices: the slow and easy way or the faster, hands-on way.

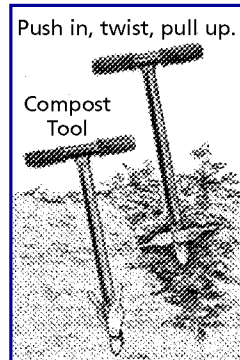
### The Easy Way

Once your bin is full, just let it be and you’ll have ready-to-use compost in a year or so. If your bin is movable, you can take the bin off the pile and let the pile slowly decompose where it is.

### The Faster Way

You can have ready-to-use compost in as little as 1 to 6 months (depending on what you started with and how warm or cold the weather is). Each time you turn and mix the decomposing materials in your bin, you speed up the process. Here are two ways to mix your compost pile:

- 🏠 **Compost tool.** A compost tool looks like a cane with two little wings at the bottom end. When you push the tool into the pile the little wings



fold flush with the cane, but when you pull it out the wings stand out sideways and pull bits of the pile with them. Push in and pull out all over the pile and the compost gets mixed and loosened.

**Fork.** Use a garden fork or pitchfork and move the pile from one bin into another. As you turn, put the dryer outside material into the center of the new pile.

Mix or turn your pile every two or three weeks until it is reduced in size and a uniform crumbly dark brown.

## USING YOUR FINISHED COMPOST

Compost is a wonderful soil and plant food. You can work it into the top few inches of the soil or use it as a surface mulch. Either way, it will improve your soil texture and add a slow-release source of plant nutrients. Compost, once mixed into your soil, also attracts worms. The worms in your garden aerate the soil and help break down organic matter.

Your finished compost may have some large, woody chunks that have not broken down. These will not hurt your garden, but if you don't like how they look or want to use a spreader to apply it, you can screen them out. To make a serviceable screen, staple 1/4-inch hardware cloth to a wooden frame. Toss the larger bits back into the new pile for another cycle.

Store compost until you need it in covered cans or by covering the finished pile with plastic to keep off the rain.

### In Your Vegetable Garden

One to three inches of compost makes a perfect pre-planting fertilizer for all vegetable crops. Just spread it over your planting bed or row and work it into the top few inches of soil.

### In Your Garden Beds

Compost is a great slow-release fertilizer and top-dressing for your flowers, shrubs, and trees. It also makes a very attractive weed-suppressing mulch. Spread an inch of compost under your ornamen-

## TROUBLESHOOTING PROBLEMS

Symptom	Cause	Cure
Full bin doesn't heat up	Materials too wet	Get a handful of material from inside the pile and squeeze it—if water drips out of it, the pile is too wet. Turn the pile into another bin, adding thin layers of dry straw or shredded newspaper.
Full bin doesn't heat up	Materials too dry	Get a handful of material from inside the pile and squeeze it—if it feels crisp, the pile is too dry. Water the pile slowly so the water soaks into the whole thing.
Full bin doesn't heat up	Lots more brown stuff than green stuff	If the material is nicely moist, but it doesn't heat up after a few days, you may have used too little moist, green stuff. Turn and rebuild the pile, adding thin layers of grass clippings or alfalfa.
Full bin doesn't heat up	Cold weather	Composting slows down when the mercury drops near or below freezing. Have patience—give the pile a turn in the spring and it should heat right up.
Bad smell	Materials too wet	Get a handful of material from inside the pile and squeeze it—if water drips out of it, the pile is too wet. Turn the pile into another bin adding thin layers of dry straw or shredded newspaper.
Bad smell	Lots more green stuff than brown stuff	Turn the pile into another bin, adding thin layers of dry straw or shredded newspaper.
Flies	Poor management of kitchen waste or fresh manure	Turn the pile to cover infested materials. In the future be sure to cover fresh materials with a layer of soil or compost and bury them in the center of the pile.
Animals	Poor management of food scraps, or pile too dry—inviting nesting	In the future, be sure to cover food scraps with a layer of soil or compost and bury them in the center of the pile. Keep your pile watered so that loose, dry material will not attract animals looking for a nesting spot. Line and cover your bin with hardware cloth to keep out pests in urban areas.

tals once or twice a year.

### On Your Lawn

Compost is good food for your lawn and will help reduce watering and disease problems. Spread a scant 1/2-inch layer of compost over your lawn in early spring and again in fall.