

Why compost?



Why Should You Compost?

There are several good reasons for composting your yard and food wastes.

• **Composting can save you money.** You save on garbage collection and dump fees, and you won't need to buy leaf bags.

• **Composting turns yard waste into resources.** Good compost is expensive to buy but free for the making. Money does grow on trees!

Composting is convenient. It's easier to compost yard waste than to bag and drag it to the trash can or to take it to the landfill or transfer station.

Composting benefits soil and plants. Using compost helps your plants grow healthier and faster by keeping the soil loose and well drained.

Composting saves landfill space. Home composters are helping to solve our garbage disposal problems by reducing the volume of solid waste needing to be landfilled.

Nature's Recycling System

Nature's recycling system is simple and efficient. Leaves and branches that fall to the forest floor form a rich, moist layer of *mulch* that protects the roots of plants and provides a home for nature's recyclers: bacteria, worms, and insects. These organisms feed on the organic litter, turning it into compost. As the mulch decomposes, nutrients essential to plant growth are released into the soil and are absorbed through the roots. The new leaves and branches that grow eventually die and fall to the ground as mulch – and the cycle continues.

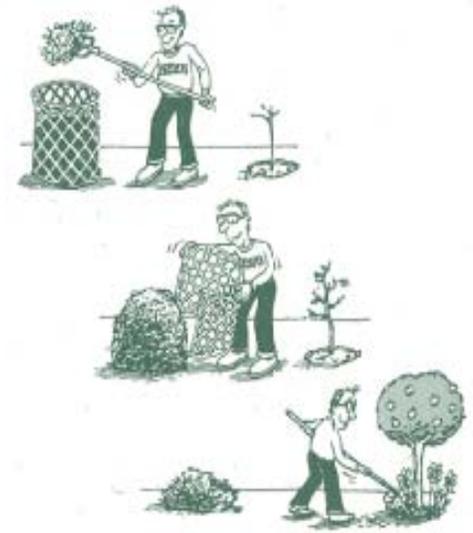
Nature's recyclers are hard at work in our yards and gardens, too. They can be found in the soil as well as on the surfaces of twigs, leaves and grass clippings. If we place our yard wastes in a suitable spot, nature will turn them into compost – just as it does in a forest.

Mulching

We can easily put nature's recycling system to work in our gardens by spreading yard wastes around trees, shrubs, and other plantings. This is called "mulching." Mulching keeps soil loose and moist, smothers weeds, prevents soil erosion, and releases nutrients as the material decomposes. Some common mulching materials and uses:

Waste Material	Recommended Use As Mulch
• Grass clippings • Green leaves	• Place a 1/2"-thick-layer around vegetables, flowers, trees and shrubs.
• Brown leaves • Pine needles • Sawdust	• Spread a 3"-6" layer around trees and shrubs out to the drip line. Use it to cover garden beds through winter.
• Wood chips	• Surround trees and shrubs with a 3"-6" layer. Chips can also be used to soften garden paths.

Note: Sawdust and wood chips should *only* be used as a surface mulch on trees and shrubs. *Do not* use woody wastes on annual planting areas where they can be mixed into the soil. And *never* mulch with diseased or insect-infested plant wastes.



Compost Piles & Holding Bins

For easy and efficient composting, yard wastes can simply be stacked up into *piles*. Leaves, grass clippings, twigs and weeds (except those that have gone to seed or which spread by runners, such as morning glory or buttercup) can be easily added to a pile as they are collected from the yard. It is not necessary to add soil, fertilizer or compost "starter" to a pile, as all the ingredients required for composting are already present in yard wastes.

A tidier composting method makes use of *holding bins*, simple structures that surround and confine compost piles. Bins can be made of wire mesh shaped into a ring, or from wooden pallets lashed together to form a square.

Harvesting the finished compost from a pile or holding bin is easy. After waiting from six months to a year for the yard wastes to fully decompose, remove the bin (if used) and set it up again nearby. Starting at the top of the pile, remove any recently added wastes and either place them into the relocated bin or use them to begin a new pile. When you reach material that resembles rich soil, remove it for use in your garden. Large branches and other undecomposed wastes should be pulled out and shredded for further composting.

Food Wastes

Food scraps should *not* be placed in a yard waste compost pile or bin because they may attract pests. The best way to compost food wastes is with a worm bin. Many garden supply stores sell worm bins or can order them for you. Or, you can build your own! For a set of instructions on how to build and operate a worm bin, call 1-800-RECYCLE or visit <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/biblio/0507021.html>.

Fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, tea bags, grains and egg shells can be safely composted this way. Meat, fish or dairy products should not be put in a worm bin, as they are likely to attract pests.

Compost Farming

Just as a farmer can increase crop yields by creating ideal growing conditions through cultivating, fertilizing, and watering, we at home can speed up the compost process by creating ideal conditions, too. Some pointers for successful "compost farming" include:

Adequate watering - Lack of water is the most common problem for home composting. Composted materials should be moist, but not dripping wet. You will need to add water to the pile when there's not enough rain to provide needed moisture.

Balanced nutrients -Compost organisms thrive on a balanced diet of carbon and nitrogen. For rapid decomposition, mix equal parts of nitrogen-rich green wastes (such as grass clippings) with carbon-rich brown wastes (such as dead leaves or corn stalks).



Aeration -A steady supply of air is required for efficient composting. Turning

or mixing a compost pile will help air to reach the center. A wide variety of multiple-bin composting systems and rotating-drum composters are available to simplify turning the compost.

Surface area -The more surface area bacteria have to work on, the faster they will decompose waste materials. To speed up the composting process, you can chop up yard wastes with a shovel or machete, run over them with a lawnmower, or put them through a shredder.

Uses of Compost

Compost contains nutrients, but it is not a substitute for fertilizers. Compost holds nutrients in the soil until plants can use them, serves to loosen and aerate clay soils, and helps retain water in poor sandy soils.

As a soil amendment: Mix up to one inch of compost into vegetable and flower gardens each year before planting. For new tree and shrub plantings, backfill with soil and then add a layer of compost around the base of the tree.

As a potting mixture: Use sifted compost to make a rich, light potting soil for houseplants and seedlings. To enrich purchased potting soils, add one part compost to two parts soil. Or make your own mixture by using equal parts of compost and sand or perlite.



As a mulch: Spreading compost around trees and shrubs helps to keep roots moist and prevent soil compaction. Start a few inches away from a tree's trunk and apply 3inches of compost.



Continue to a point beyond the tree's outermost leaves and branches. Add a two to three inch layer of woody mulch over the compost to control weeds.

For other recycling information call
1-800-RECYCLE.



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