

# **Composting Fact Sheet**

Composting is the natural breakdown of organic materials. The product, compost, is the rich organic soil that is made as microorganisms decompose yard and kitchen wastes.

## **Why should you compost?**

To save money on fertilizer, water and garden supplies; keep useful materials out of landfill; keep pollutants out of the environment; improve your lawn and garden; and save your town money.

## **What should you compost? <sup>1</sup>**

**DO** use these materials in your compost pile:

- **“Greens”** which are fresh and nitrogen-rich, such as:

Bread, grains, and pasta, grass clippings, coffee grounds and filters, tea bags, eggshells, vegetable and fruit scraps, fresh hay and wood ashes (in small amounts)

- **“Browns”** which are dried and carbon-rich

Chopped or shredded branches, shredded paper, paper towels, straw and leaves

- **Soil**, to introduce microorganisms necessary for decomposition

**DON'T** put these materials in your compost pile because these materials can attract pests, generate foul odors, or contaminate the compost.

Cat and dog manure, which may contain disease organisms; charcoal ashes, which may contain toxic compounds; herbicide or pesticide treated plants; meats, grease, bones, dairy products or cooking oil which may attract rodents or other pests; pine needles or magnolia leaves, which take a long time to break down; sick or diseased plants; treated wood; and weed plants or seeds

## **How do you get started?**

1. Choose a location that is convenient, shaded and well-drained. You may want to use a compost bin: it keeps the material in a confined area, retains heat and moisture, deters pests and reduces the effects of wind and rain.
2. Build a pile with approximately 75% browns and 25% greens (see above for details). Add materials in layers, putting branches at the bottom to allow air in the bottom of the pile.
3. If you plan to compost kitchen wastes, store them in a covered container. When the container is full, take it out to the pile.

**Please see the back side of this sheet for tips on how to accelerate break down and troubleshooting.**

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<sup>1</sup> Text from: North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance (NCDENR). Backyard Composting Fact Sheet. April 2002. Available at: <http://www.p2pays.org/ref/15/14411.pdf> (6/8/10)

## When is the compost usable?

The time required to fully compost materials will vary from six weeks to one year depending on content, temperature, moisture and aeration. In general, the less time and energy you commit to the pile, the slower it will break down.

In order to accelerate breakdown:

1. Aerate the pile by turning it over every so often and mixing it well
2. Add soil periodically to introduce more microorganisms
3. Increase surface area by chopping up the kitchen scraps into finer pieces
4. Ensure the pile is wet (i.e., the consistency of a wrung out sponge) by watering it and soaking any dry inputs such as breads
5. Pay attention to the ratio of the inputs. In order to keep the temperature of the pile high, add more greens. The higher the temperature, the greater the decomposition.

## Troubleshooting Tips<sup>2</sup>

Symptoms	Problem	Solution
The compost has a bad odor.	Not enough air.	Turn it. Add dry material if the pile is too wet.
The center of the pile is dry.	Not enough water.	Moisten and turn the pile.
The compost is damp and warm only in the middle.	Too small	Collect more material and mix the old ingredients into a new pile. Turn the pile.
The heap is damp and sweet-smelling, but still will not heat up	Lack of oxygen	Mix in a nitrogen source like fresh grass clippings or manure.

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<sup>2</sup>Troubleshooting Table from: Composting at Home Fact Sheet. By Frederick C. Michel, Jr., Joe E. Heimlich, and Harry A. J. Hoitink. Ohio State University Extension. Horticulture and Crop Science. Available at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/1000/1189.html> (6/8/10)