

# COMPOST

Turn Your Trash Into Treasure

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by Tess Pennington

To continue with a continuous supply of healthy soil, consider composting your food scraps, cardboard and other items. This is a great way to make use of your trash! It takes 6-8 weeks to build fertile organic soil that's ready for planting.

Generally speaking the decomposition process involves both:

- Aerobic – oxygen decomposes and stabilizes the composting materials.
- Anaerobic – lack of oxygen – composition breaks down by the actions of living organisms.

“In both of these processes, bacteria, fungi, molds, protozoa and other organisms feed upon decaying organic materials initially, while in the later stages of decomposition mites, millipedes, centipedes, spring tails, beetles and earthworms further breakdown and enrich the composting materials. The organisms will vary in the pile due to temperature conditions, but the goal in composting is to create the most favorable environment possible for the desired organisms.” ([Source – Aggie Horticulture Department](#))

The best way to create a favorable environment for these types of organisms to thrive in is to have plenty of carbon and nitrogen-rich materials and getting the right ratio of both.

**Carbon** – Carbon materials help give compost its light, fluffy body. Materials such as, branches, stems, dried leaves, fruit and vegetable peels, untreated bits of wood, bark or pellets, paper, newspapers, corn stalks, coffee filters, pine needles, egg shells, straw, peat moss, wood ash.

**Nitrogen** – These type of materials will provide raw materials for making enzymes. Items such as, manures, foods scraps, green lawn clippings and green leaves.



## Composting Do's

- vegetable and fruit scraps
- tea bags and coffee grounds
- egg shells
- laundry lint
- paper
- cardboard
- paper towel rolls
- newspaper
- untreated wood shavings or sawdust
- paper cutlery
- potting soil
- plants and leaves
- bones
- animal manure
- natural wood ashes



## Composting Don'ts

- diseased yard waste
- meat
- oil
- dairy
- heavily coated printed paper
- invasive weeds
- hazardous waste
- plastic items
- styrofoam

- **Coffee Grounds:** What's better than starting the day with a strong cup of coffee? Saving those coffee grounds and using them as compost, of course! Coffee grounds are an excellent addition to your garden; simply spread them directly onto the soil. Don't worry about coffee grounds being acidic—since acid is water-soluble, it stays in your coffee and out of your garden. Coffee grounds improve soil structure and anecdotal evidence suggests that the grounds keep slugs and other pests away. As a bonus, you can even shred used paper coffee filters and throw them into soil as well. These act as a carbon source and make your soil even richer.
- **Toilet Paper Rolls:** I'm willing to bet you regularly use toilet paper, and that means you have a steady supply of free seed starter pots at your fingertips. Simply take an empty toilet paper roll and cut it in half. Take one of the halves and cut four slits approximately an inch up the roll. Fold the toilet paper rolls into each other to form the base of the seed pot, using tape to secure. Layer your soil and seed inside. Once the seed is ready to be planted, you can simply cut off the bottom of the toilet paper pot and plant it directly into the soil, where it will break down over time.
- **Lemon Rinds and Eggshells:** An even easier, completely natural, no work seed starter is a lemon rind or an egg shell. Just poke a hole into the bottom of either of these for drainage, sprout seeds and then plant directly into the soil. The peels and shells will not only break down easily, but they will also provide nourishment to the soil. Eggshells are also an excellent deterrent for slugs

around your garden plants. You can also plant your seeds in half of an eggshell and simply plant it – shell and all – directly in your garden when ready.

Some other ways to utilize trash are to use beer for a quick and easy slug trap. Once you've gathered a few ounces, take the liquid to your garden and make a slug trap. Put some of the beer into a wide, shallow jar buried in the soil. Slugs like beer so much they will crawl right into the jar and drown (not a terrible way to die). Empty your slug traps often and prop up a jar top with a stick to prevent rainwater from diluting the beer. You can also use empty long bottled wine bottles to help get water to the plants. By purchasing some ceramic watering stakes (usually available on Amazon or at gardening supply stores), these stakes will deliver small amounts of water to the plant to keep them revitalized. As well, you can use broken ceramic pot shards to use as plant markers to label the plants in your garden. Identify areas where labels could be helpful, then break the broken pot into enough pieces for your project. Try to keep them roughly the same size for uniformity, but feel free to be as creative as you like. Use a permanent marker or paint that won't wash off in the elements to write the names of the plants (if your handwriting isn't great, a stencil might come in handy). Try out a few positions before sticking the label firmly into the ground. See, there are so many uses for trash in the garden!

## HOW TO STORE COMPOSTING ITEMS INDOORS

Those who begin collecting their compostable items have a problem with the smell emanating from their kitchen area. Here are some simple solutions to keeping the smells at bay.

- **Enclose it.** Kitchen scraps that have been enclosed in a container will help keep the smells from wafting into other rooms. Cutting the kitchen scraps into small pieces will help them fit easily into the canister. There are fancy porcelain compost buckets and pails you can buy, but the cheapest compost contain you can use are the ones found in your home: plastic coffee containers, empty protein powder containers, etc. Utilize what you have around you. If you have multiple composting canisters, you can add more to your compost pile at once. Once they are added, use a hose to water the heap; the moisture will help expedite the decomposition process.
- **Freeze it.** Add your kitchen scraps to a zip-loc bag and freeze it. This will assist in the decomposition process, as well as eliminate the smells from the kitchen. Simply freeze the scraps until you are ready to add it to the compost pile or worm bin. When ready, allow the bag to thaw out before adding. The frozen food may harm the beneficial insects. Another tip is to cut your scraps up into smaller bits to help the decomposition process and beneficial organisms break it down faster.

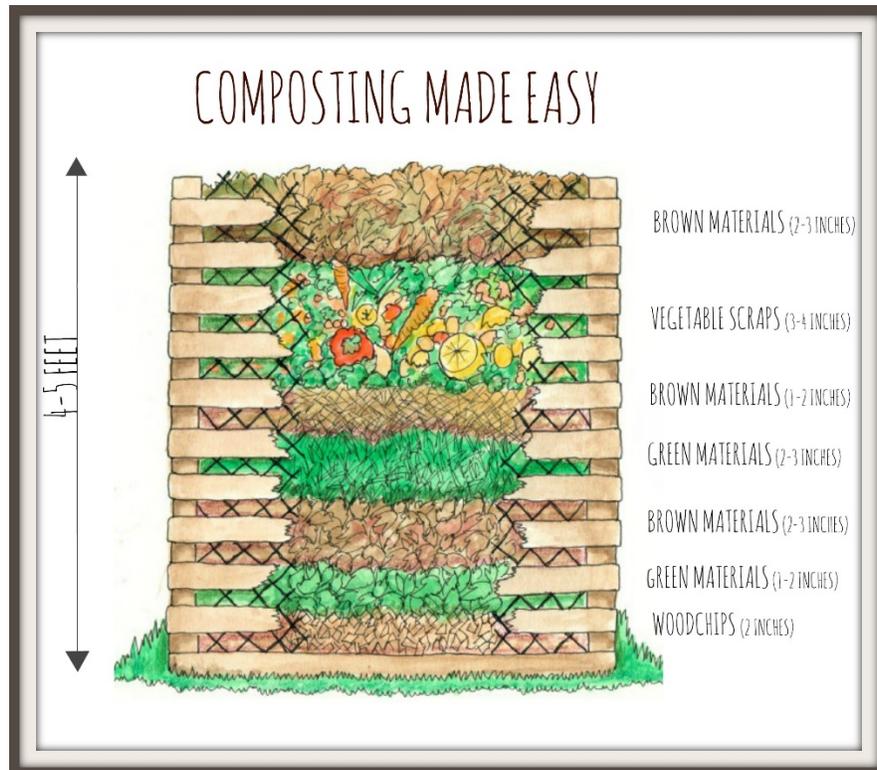
- **Fill an egg carton.** Egg cartons are great “brown materials’ for the compost heap. Add vegetables, fruit scraps and egg shells to the carton all at once. Or, you can utilize the freezing method with this method. When you have filled multiple egg cartons filled with scraps, add them to the compost pile, water it down and layer with a healthy addition of leaves or grass clippings.
- **Vermiculture.** Maybe it’s the tomboy in me, but I love having a worm bin. They break everything down and the happier they are, the more they produce. If you don’t want to collect your kitchen scraps and save them, consider starting a worm bin and adding the kitchen scraps more frequently. An added benefit to keeping worms is the rich worm tea they produce. Plants will greatly benefit from worm tea. It can either be diluted or added directly to the garden. You can give your garden an added boost from this worm bi-product.
- **No mess composting.** There are two ways to utilize the no mess composting: trench composting and sheet composting. Trench composting is simple; all that is required is to dig a twelve inch “trench” or hole near the plants that will use the compost. Add four to six inches of “brown” and “green” composting material and bury it with the reserved soil. Sheet Composting is more of a longer term composting plan, but is very simple. Place organic matter to be composted directly on to the soil as a form of mulch and allow it to decay naturally. One or more layers can be added. Water thoroughly and allow the decomposition process to begin. New plants can be planted in the area in the next season.

## THE RIGHT RATIO

A healthy compost pile should have more carbon than nitrogen. The best compost combines 2 to 3 parts “brown,” or carbon-rich materials, with 1 part “green,” or nitrogen-rich materials. Although this varies with the desired compost that is wanted. The bulkiness of the carbon materials allows oxygen to penetrate and nourish the organisms living within the pile. Compost should never smell. If you notice a “smell” in your compost pile, your ratios are probably off balance or you are watering too frequently.

Cover the first layer with 6 inches of “brown” material and then 3 inches of “green” material. Alternate between the “brown” and “green” layers. Aerate the compost pile every week or two by using a pitchfork to turn it, or by shaking the compost bin. If all goes well, the compost should be finished in one to four months. Experts have said to let the compost pile sit for two weeks before using. Most gardeners keep two piles, one started about 4-6 months after the first. This way, they can use the compost from the first pile as the other is decomposing.

The end result of composting brown and green materials is a nutrient rich soil that will hold water, allows for air flow, controls erosion, and creates a home for the bacteria that protects plants against disease, captures airborne nitrogen, attract soil-enriching earthworms. In addition to the benefits to the soil, composting cuts down on greenhouse gases as well as naturally discards certain organic materials that would otherwise be thrown into a trash can.



### Things to Keep In Mind

- Make sure that the composter is positioned in a partially shaded area and next to a water source.
- It is a good idea to shred any materials used to speed up the composition cycle.
- Never add materials treated with poisons or pesticides that will contaminate the compost.
- A good indicator that the compost is working is if it is hot in the middle.
- Remember that moisture is the key to composting success. If contents are too dry, add some water and some moisture rich “green materials” to add more moisture.

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- If an unpleasant odor is coming from the bin, place a layer of “brown” carbon materials on top.
- If possible, toss a few handfuls of leaves or shredded newspaper into the bin whenever you add very wet items to maintain the correct moisture levels.
- The compost should be moist, but not wet. It should feel like a moist sponge. If the materials are saturated by water, then oxygen cannot do its work. The end result is a dark, rich, nutrient enriched soil.

Composting is not a hard science to understand. What a wonderful gift to give back to nature. It is amazing that using old kitchen scraps and natural organic materials such as newspapers and sawdust can be returned to earth to create a nutrient rich soil conditioner to give plants what they need to grow more bountiful fruits and vegetables.

## **BENEFICIAL INSECTS**

When we garden, we are creating the best conditions for that plant to grow on its own. It’s all about fostering natural processes to produce something that we need. One of the ways we can do that, is by attracting the right kind of bugs to our garden. That statement might also sound kind of dumb, at least to rookie gardener anyway. Most of us were raised on the idea that bugs are a menace, and we must spray our gardens with pesticides to keep them away, but it doesn’t have to be that way. There are plenty of species that are beneficial to our gardens. They can pollinate your plants, fight pests, and in some cases they can help fertilize your soil. If these are the kinds of benefits you want your garden to have, here’s how you can attract these critters.

As well, consider adding flowering plants like sunflowers, or herbs like lavender that beneficial plants are attracted to. Here are some of the most popular types of insects to have in your garden.

### **Ladybugs**

Some of the worst pests you can have in your garden are the ones you can barely see. Fortunately, ladybugs have a big appetite for many of them, including aphids, mites, and mealy bugs. They are attracted to certain plants that produce pollen, like buckwheat, dandelion, mustard, coriander, cilantro, dill, and so many others.

### **Spiders**

I know you probably don’t want spiders, but your garden sure does. These guys are one of the most prolific bug killers in the animal kingdom, and they’re a great way to keep your garden spotless. Fortunately, you don’t really need to attract them per say, since they are so abundant all over the world. They’ve probably already found their way to your garden at some point.

The real trick is getting them to stay. For that, you need to give them a home. A nice cool little nook that they can cuddle up in. One of the best things you can do is lay down some mulch between the spaces of your plants, like grass clippings or dried leaves. This will shelter them from the elements, retain moisture for them to drink, and keep them close to your plants.

## **Bees**

Bees are excellent pollinators, and much like spiders, you need to provide the right conditions for them to build their home. For ground dwelling bees, one of the most important attributes they are looking for, is privacy, especially when they first start a colony. They want to settle in a space that won't be disturbed. You can give them a bare patch of loose soil, topped off by some debris like leaves and rotting wood. The spot also needs sunlight but not too much. An ideal spot would have sun in the morning, but would have some shade in the late afternoon when it gets really hot. They also seem to prefer sloped locations that face south.

Wood dwelling bees like to make their homes in trees, and one of the easiest ways you can duplicate that is by drilling holes in a fence post or a rotting stump. In both cases, the bees need a source of water, and an ideal source would include a really shallow puddle of some kind, with perhaps a few pebbles that they can land on and drink from. They of course, also need plenty of flowers to pollinate, of which there are many species that they prefer alongside many of the foods you are probably growing.

## **Earthworms**

Worms not only aerate the soil, they also provide an excellent fertilizer in the form of the castings they behind after consuming organic matter. To attract them, all you really need to do is provide a food source, such as leaves, manure, kitchen scraps, and rotting logs. They also seem to love cornmeal. This is probably the easiest bug to attract, and there's a good chance that your garden already has them.

## **Praying mantis**

Despite their creepy alien appearance, you'll definitely want at least one of these guys in your garden. Simply put, they put spiders to shame for their ability to prey on other bugs. They're not picky either. They'll eat just about anything, including each other from time to time. In terms of natural pest control, the praying mantis is a nuclear option, since they will also gobble up plenty of beneficial insects into their bottomless pit of a stomach.

They seem to be attracted to roses and raspberry plants, as well as other shrubs that might provide shelter. They also seem to enjoy marigolds, cosmos, and dill plants. Given their size, they'll need plenty of water so make sure there is some kind of shallow puddle or water dish near these plants. Though they prefer drinking the dew off of

plants, so on a particularly dry day you can spray a little water on whatever they're living on.