What is Composting and How to Get Started with Composting for Beginners

We're all looking for ways to be more sustainable in our lives, and composting is a great way to reduce waste and help the environment. But where do you start?

By composting at home, you can divert organic waste from the landfill and create nutrient-rich soil for your plants. There are composting options to suit any living situation, whether or not you have access to outdoor space in your home. Here's a look at composting and how to get started.

What is composting

Composting is a process that helps to break down organic waste material, such as leaves and food scraps, into a nutrient-rich soil amendment. The composting process is aided by microorganisms, which break down the complex molecules in the organic matter into simpler substances that plants can use.

In addition to providing an essential source of nutrients for plants, compost also helps to improve drainage and aeration in the soil. As a result, compost can be an extremely effective way to improve the health of your garden or contribute to community gardening efforts. Composting can also cut your household’s food waste in half.

Composting is relatively simple and can be done at home with little effort. All you need is a container, some organic matter, and patience. With time and care, you can reduce your household's food waste and create nutrient-rich compost to help your plants thrive.

Why composting matters

Composting is beneficial for the environment because it reduces the amount of waste in landfills, and it also reduces methane emissions from decomposing organic matter.

When organic waste decomposes, it emits methane gas into the atmosphere. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas that traps heat and contributes to climate change.

According to the EPA, methane emissions from food waste account for nearly 11% of all human-related methane emissions in the US. Reducing food waste and learning composting skills are essential for protecting our planet.

There are many ways to reduce food waste, such as composting, donating excess food, and meal planning.

Benefits of composting

Aside from the environmental benefits of composting, which are the main reasons we recommend it, there are some additional benefits.

- Improving the drainage, aeration, and structure of the soil
- Increasing the soil's ability to hold water and nutrients
- Supporting living soil organisms, improving soil health
- Helping dissolve mineral forms of nutrients
- Buffering the soil from chemical imbalances
- Providing biological control of certain soil pests

What can you compost?

The key ingredients in any compost pile are browns and greens.

- Browns are high in carbon and include materials like dead leaves, twigs, and branches.
- Greens are high in nitrogen and include grass clippings, vegetable scraps, and coffee grounds.

A healthy compost pile should have a ratio of about three parts browns to one part greens.

In terms of what can be composted, pretty much any organic material can be added to the pile. If it comes from a plant, it's probably good to add to your bin. This includes eggshells, fruits and vegetables, tea bags, nut shells, and even hair and fur.

Here's a list of what you should add to your compost bin:

- Shredded newspaper
- Shredded cardboard
- Shredded paper
- Yard trimmings
- Grass clippings
- Houseplants
- Garden cuttings
- Hay and straw
- Leaves
- Sawdust
- Wood chips
- Hair and fur
- Fruits and vegetables
- Crushed eggshells (Finely crush these up before adding to your bin)
- Coffee grounds and filters
- Compostable tea bags
- Sustainable products labeled as "home compostable."

What not to compost

There are a few ingredients you shouldn't add to your compost bin. For now, these should be thrown away or disposed of properly to avoid ruining your compost or rendering it unusable.

- Ashes (coal or charcoal): May be toxic to plants
- Cat litter: Disease may be present
- Colored paper
- Dog droppings: Disease may be present also
- Lime: Acidity
- Meat, fat, grease, oils, bones
- Non-biodegradable materials
- Toxic materials

How to start composting at home

Many people are surprised to learn that composting is easy at home, whether you live in a single-family home, a flat, or a condo. Here are a few tips to get you started:

Choose a location for your compost bin or pile. If you have a small yard, you can keep your compost in a bin or container. You can build an outdoor compost heap if you have a larger yard. Either way, ensure the location is near a water source.

If you live in a flat, your compost bin can be placed under the kitchen sink, on your balcony, or in a laundry or storage area. But, really, you should put it wherever it makes sense for you.

Add some organic material to your bin or heap. This can include leaves, grass clippings, fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, and eggshells. As you add material to your compost, be sure to alternate layers between "green" and "brown" materials. Green materials are high in nitrogen and help to break down the organic matter; brown materials are high in carbon and help to absorb excess moisture.

Turn or stir your compost regularly to aerate it and help it break down more quickly. After a few weeks or months (depending on the size of your compost bin/heap), you'll have nutrient-rich compost perfect for use in gardens or potting soil mixes!

If you live in a city and don't have enough plants to use all that compost on, we still have options for you to explore. Look at what local or municipal programs will come by and pick up your compost.

If no pickup services are available, your next best option is to find a place to drop off your compost weekly or monthly. This might be a municipal program, a community garden, or it could be a gardener in your area who will happily accept your food scraps and compost.

Best composting options for flats or apartments

Traditional composting can pose a challenge for those living in flats or apartments. Most compost bins require a certain amount of space, and many people don't have the outdoor space necessary to accommodate a container.

Fortunately, several composting options are available for those living in confined spaces.

One popular option is vermicomposting, which uses worms to break down organic matter. This method can be done indoors, and it doesn't require a lot of space. It's popular among people who live in apartments with balconies since not everyone enjoys the idea of having a worm bin indoors.

Another option is bokashi composting, which uses an anaerobic process to break down organic waste. This method also doesn't require much space and can be done indoors or outdoors.

Bokashi is one of the most popular options for indoor composting in a flat. It's nearly odorless if done correctly and compact, so it's easy to tuck in a cabinet or under a sink.

Getting the perfect compost ratio

What are the consequences of having an incorrect composting ratio? Several things, but one of the most frequent and unpleasant, is a smelly, mushy compost

pile. This occurs when your mixture has too many green materials (or too much nitrogen). As a result, your compost will smell like rotting food waste because that's precisely what it is: organic slime.

On the other hand, you might wind up with a dry, crumbling, and ultimately useless compost pile. This happens when your compost contains too many brown materials (or carbon). As a result, the mix may not break down; instead, it goes "dormant" and remains a hodge-podge of whatever dry, organic stuff you put in.

If either of these scenarios happens, you can probably fix the issue! Remedy the situation by adding more greens if your compost is too dry and more browns if your compost is too mushy.

The optimum formula for a perfect compost pile and the ideal carbon to nitrogen ratio is three parts carbon (browns) to one part nitrogen (greens). This ensures that your compost's microorganisms are adequately nourished. However, if your compost seems too dry or crumbly with this formula, some composters have successfully utilized a 1:1 ratio.

Layering your compost

For conventional and more advanced composting methods, layering your materials is the best way to get a well-balanced mix of browns and greens. Here's a step-by-step walkthrough:

- To start, add six inches of brown matter to the bottom of your bin. This helps create a carbon-rich base.
- Then, chop two to four inches of greens and mix them with the browns. Make sure not to let the greens touch the edges of your bin too much.
- Afterward, cover this with more browns until your nitrogen-rich green material is no longer visible.

If you have extra composting materials, repeat the same process. Effectively, it would be best if you aimed to add your compost in layers. Browns, greens, browns, greens, repeat.

Miscellaneous tips for composting

Store food scraps in your freezer to avoid bugs and smells

Anyone who has ever left a piece of fruit out on the counter knows that it doesn't take long for bugs to find it. Even worse, those bugs can quickly multiply, infesting the entire house. Food scraps are especially attractive to bugs, and the warm temperature of most kitchens provides the perfect breeding ground for them.

An easy way to avoid this problem is to store food scraps in the freezer. Not only will this prevent bugs from being able to access the food, but it will also help to prevent bad smells from taking over the kitchen. Then, when it's time to dispose of the food scraps, they can be taken directly from the freezer to the compost bin.

Invest in a high-quality compost bin or tumbler

Investing in a high-quality compost bin or tumbler is a great way to make your gardening efforts more efficient and effective. Bin models typically have a lid to keep out pests and a removable bottom for easy dumping, while tumblers feature aerating paddles that help speed up the decomposition process.

Research your chosen composting method.

Each has advantages and disadvantages, so it's essential to research before deciding which one is right for you. Then, once you've chosen a method, follow the instructions carefully to ensure that your compost will be nutrient-rich and garden-ready in no time.

Add some water to your bin now and then if it looks dry.

One of the most important things you can do for your compost bin is to add water regularly. If the compost looks dry, you may need to water your compost. Ideally, the compost should have the dampness of a sponge that has been wrung out.

This will help to break down the organic matter and speed up the composting process. Compost that's too dry won't be able to support the microbes or worms feeding on it and will therefore slow down the composting process significantly.

Give your compost a mix once a week or so to aerate it

The compost pile must be aerated regularly to allow oxygen to reach the microorganisms that break down the organic matter. A simple way to aerate your compost pile is to turn it with a shovel or pitchfork once a week.

Don't add pet waste, diseased plants, or invasive weeds to your compost pile.

Not all organic materials are suitable for composting. Pet waste, for example, can contain harmful bacteria that can contaminate other materials in the compost pile. Diseased plants can also spread disease to other plants in the compost, and invasive weeds can take over the compost pile and choke out other plants.

Be patient! It takes time for your compost to break down.

Anyone attempting to make their own compost knows it is not an instant process. It can take weeks, or even months, for the material to break down into usable compost.

While it may be tempting to add more green waste to speed up the process, this can actually have the opposite effect. Adding too much green waste can create an imbalance in the compost, leading to an unpleasant smell and slowing down the decomposition process.

The key is to be patient and add a little bit of green waste at a time. With a little patience, you will eventually have rich, nutrient-rich compost perfect for your garden or a local grower.

FAQs about getting started with composting

Composting is a great way to reduce waste, provide nutrients for your plants, and help the environment. But if you've never done it before, you might have some questions. Here are a few of the most common questions we get about composting:

What can I compost?

You can compost almost any organic material, including fruits and vegetables, coffee grounds and filters, eggshells, and yard waste. If you're unsure whether something is compostable, a good rule of thumb is that it can probably be composted if it comes from a plant.

Where should I put my compost bin?

Your compost bin can be placed in your yard or even inside your house. Just make sure it's in a convenient location for you so that you're more likely actually to use it! If you live in an urban area, there are often community composting programs that you can participate in.

What if my compost smells bad?

If your compost smells bad, the material in your bin isn't getting enough air. Try stirring the material in your bin to allow air to circulate better. You can also add dry materials such as leaves or shredded newspaper to absorb excess moisture.

How do I know when my compost is ready to use?

Your compost is ready to use when it's dark, crumbly, and looks like rich soil. It should have an earthy smell. If your compost still has large chunks of organic matter, it needs more time to break down.

Hopefully, these FAQs have helped you feel more confident about getting started with composting. For more information, check out our other articles on composting or contact your local extension office. They'll be able to provide you with resources specific to your area.

Wrapping up

Now that you know more about composting and how to get started, why not try it in your home? With a bit of time and effort, you can make a difference for the environment and your plants. Composting is a great way to reduce waste, help the planet, and create nutrient-rich soil for your garden.

If you have a yard, a traditional compost bin or a compost tumbler would likely be a great fit. If you live in a flat, look at vermicomposting or a bokashi container.

We can all take part in reducing our food waste collectively if we each commit to doing our part. Small changes add up to a significant impact. Thanks for reading!