



COMPOSTING 101

Standard Method

1. Start the compost pile with a layer of browns. If you have a lot of coarse organic materials, you may want to chop or shred them into smaller pieces. Smaller pieces decay faster.
2. Add a layer of green materials. Try to maintain a ratio of **1 part greens to 3 parts browns**.
3. Add a **shovelful or two of soil or finished compost**. This will add extra bacteria and fungi to get your pile off to a fast start.
4. Mix the materials together with a pitchfork or shovel.
5. Check for proper moisture. **Use the squeeze test** (*below*) to be sure that your pile has the right amount of water for the composting process. Add water or additional dry material when necessary.
6. Continue to build layers until the bin is full.
7. **Mix the pile after one week. Check for proper moisture and aerate the pile.** Move coarse or less decayed material from the outside to the center. Adjust the moisture by sprinkling with water or adding dry material. Steam may be seen when you mix the pile.
8. **Continue mixing the pile every week or two.** Check for proper moisture. During this time the compost will begin to look uniform and dark brown in color. The pile will shrink as the composting process takes place. When the pile does not heat up after turning, is neither too wet nor too dry, and most of the original materials are no longer recognizable, it is now ready for curing.
9. Allow the pile to cure for at least a few weeks, until it looks mostly dark and crumbly and has a pleasant earthy odor. It is now ready to use as a soil amendment.

Moisture "Squeeze" Test

Take a handful of compost material and squeeze it as tightly as you can.

- If you cannot get one drop of moisture to squeeze out, it is too dry.
- If you get more than one or two drops, it is too wet.
- If you get one or two drops, it is the appropriate moisture level.

The Best Compost Should:

- Smell pleasant – something like the soil on the forest floor.
- Look dark and crumbly with no recognizable starting materials
- Be moist but not wet

Slow Method

The Slow Method is similar to the Standard Method with the following modifications:

1. No need to check for the proper mix or moisture! You build the pile with green or brown materials as they become available.
2. If you add kitchen waste, it must be buried deep in the pile. Dig a hole in the top or side of the pile and cover the scraps with several inches of brown material or active compost. Foods left on the surface may attract pests or cause odors.
3. After six months or more, finished compost will be found at the bottom or oldest sections of the pile. It may be collected and used as it is produced.

Fast Method

If you want a lot of compost to add to your soil, or if you generate an enormous amount of organic matter, you may wish to use the Fast Method to compost your yard, garden and kitchen materials.

The **Fast Method requires MUCH MORE of your time and energy, but you will get a finished product very quickly.** In this method, the composting process is closely watched to guarantee ideal conditions at all times.

The Fast Method is different from the Standard Method in the following ways:

1. Extra space for gathering and storing organic materials will be needed.
2. All organic materials are chopped or shredded before they are added to the pile. Both electric and gasoline powered chippers and shredders are available. Lawn mowers, pruners or hatchets can also be used to chop items.
3. **Check the temperature often with a compost or soil thermometer.** In summer months, it may be necessary to check the pile daily. With the Fast Method, very high temperatures (>140°F) can be reached quickly. These temperatures are high enough to kill most weed seeds and disease causing organisms. However, some composting microbes may also be killed. If the temperature goes above 160°F, cool the pile by turning or adding coarse, brown materials. (Refer to Troubleshooting Guide).
4. **Mix the pile every three days and check for proper moisture.**

Compost Materials

Greens (high in nitrogen)

grass clippings
prunings
fruits and vegetables
houseplants

manure: e.g., cow, horse, pig,
chicken or rabbit
kitchen scraps: e.g., stale
bread, egg shells, coffee

grounds (filters too), tea
bags, citrus rinds fruit
and vegetable peels

Browns (high in carbon)

leaves
bark
straw

woodchips
sawdust
newspaper (shredded)

brush (chopped)
corn stalks

DO NOT USE

bones
dog/cat feces
oil
grease

fat
wood ash
meat /fish scraps
dairy products

weed seeds
diseased plants

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

U.S. Composting Council Fact Sheet

The best composting information I have found is at:

http://organiclifestyles.tamu.edu/compost/home_composting_faq.pdf

Please check it out to get complete directions and tips on home composting.

Other Good Sites:

<http://www.urbanharvest.org>

<http://www.carolinacompost.com/backyardcomposting>

<http://www.natureswayresources.com>

<http://www.thegroundup.com>

and, of course, <http://www.BuchanansPlants.com>