Composting: Balancing Your Greens and Browns

Sometimes, composting gets a bad rap…..
"It smells, attracts critters, looks messy"
If that describes your compost read on:

The Process of Composting

The process of composting is not just placing all of your food scraps in a heap. The old adage “compost happens” is certainly true, but you can help it happen smoothly by remembering who is actually doing the work in your compost pile. Millions of micro- and macro-organisms are the work force and you need to meet their requirements. To process the scraps into compost, the workers need food, air and moisture. For the organisms to be productive, the system has to be in balance. This is not hard, it just takes some forethought and simple management techniques. You need the right feedstock in the right proportions and you need space in which to compost. Then, by following a few general procedures, you can easily recycle your food scraps and yard trimmings into a valuable soil amendment.

Feedstocks

Greens = Nitrogen Wet Materials

Food scraps
Grass Clippings
Rotted Manure

Browns = Carbon Dry Materials

Brown Leaves
Straw
Shredded Paper
Sawdust, Woodchips

Greens, the nitrogen source, are colorful and wet. They provide nutrients and moisture.

Browns, the carbon source, provide energy and are also used for absorbing excess moisture and giving structural strength to your pile. They help keep the pile porous, facilitate air flow and prevent compaction.
Start with a layer of coarse “browns” on the soil. Make a well in this layer and put the “greens” you’ve collected into that well. Try to keep the food scraps away from the outside edges of the entire pile (only brown material should be visible). Cover your “greens” with a generous layer of “browns” so that no food is showing. This will keep insect and animal pests out of your pile and filter any odor. Keep adding layers of greens and browns on top of your initial layer. Like making lasagna, keep layering the feedstock until the mass reaches a height with which you are comfortable. As you are building the pile management choices can be made. If you have time and space and can wait for a usable product a year or more after building the pile, let it work passively. Passive composting requires less labor but more time. If processing space is limited and you want a product more quickly, turning will help to speed the process. The pile can be turned with a pitch fork or shovel which helps to break up material, move organisms to other areas and better homogenize the mass.

Layering and choosing the right organics creates the right environment for compost to “happen”.