



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



Brown leaves

Browns = Carbon Dry Materials

Brown Leaves
Straw
Shredded Paper
Sawdust, Woodchips



Food scraps



Grass clippings



Woodchips



Sawdust

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.

Space

A minimum volume of 1 cubic yard (3' x 3' x 3') is required for a pile to become sufficiently self-insulating to retain heat. Heat will help reduce pathogens and allow the process to occur more quickly. In hot-dry seasons and cold-wet winters larger piles will work more effectively. However, composting will still occur in smaller piles, it will just take longer to get a finished product.



Molded Plastic Bin

Bins, or some sort of containment can be beneficial. They can be three sided or 4 sided with a removable front to facilitate turning. One can build containers of scrap wood, pallets, fencing, cinderblock or cement. Metal, wood and molded plastic containers can be purchased for use as well. The bottom dimensions should be at least 3' x 3' and as tall as is comfortable.



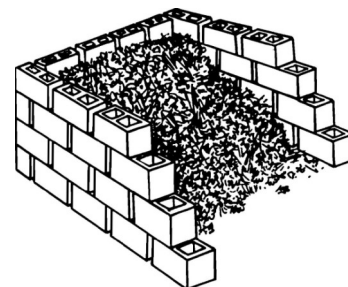
Wire Bin

Woodchips or pallets can be placed under the layers to

help air flow into the bin and through the organic materials. Another way to create airflow in the bottom of the bin is to crisscross sticks and stalks to a height of 6-8" before adding weight to the bin. Covering the top of the pile with a carbon source will keep out flies and other pests.



Scrap Wood/Pallet Bin



Cinder block bin

Putting it all together - Layering

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.

Brown layers

Green layers



Cross Section of Layering in a Bin

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