



CIY Compost It Yourself



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WHAT IS COMPOSTING AND WHY DO IT?

Composting is nature's way to recycle. It is the controlled, natural decomposition of organic matter. Microorganisms and macroorganisms break down organic materials into compost, or humus, a nutrient-rich soil amendment that improves the health and efficiency of your garden ecosystem from the ground up.

COMPOSTING HAS MANY BENEFITS FOR THE HOMEOWNER AND THE ENVIRONMENT:

- SOIL** Benefits your yard and garden by improving soil health and fertility, which increases plants' resilience to pests, disease, and other environmental stressors.
- WATER** Helps soil hold more moisture, which reduces the need for frequent watering and minimizes erosion, runoff, and nutrient loss.
- RECYCLE** Diverts valuable organic resources from becoming hazardous materials in the landfill, and encourages natural nutrient cycling.
- MONEY** Saves money by conserving water and replacing the need to purchase commercial fertilizers and soil amendments.

Composting can be practiced almost anywhere: in your backyard, at work, or at school... even in an apartment! All you need to get started is a little bit of space, the basic ingredients, and an understanding of the process.

LOOK FOR THESE ICONS TO FIND THE COMPOST INFO YOU WANT, FASTER!



COMPOSTING IN STYLE

There are several different styles of composting. Some require more time and effort, but yield quicker results. Many composters find they maximize their efficiency by practicing more than one type of composting, or by setting up multiple bin systems to have several stages of decomposition occurring simultaneously. Which style of composting best fits your needs and lifestyle?

PASSIVE COMPOSTING is a more relaxed style of composting, and requires less frequent turning and watering. The pile won't generate as much heat and may dry out at times, so the materials won't decompose as quickly. Also, weed seeds may not be killed.

ACTIVE COMPOSTING is a more engaged style of composting, and involves turning the pile on a regular basis and maintaining optimal moisture and temperature levels. This method kills weed seeds and produces finished compost in the shortest period of time.

VERMICOMPOSTING or, composting with red wiggler worms, is a fun and easy way to recycle your food scraps. It uses less space than traditional composting, and can be done indoors. This method produces worm castings, another nutrient-rich soil amendment.

COMPOST STYLE GUIDE

QUESTIONS TO ASK	PASSIVE COMPOSTING	ACTIVE COMPOSTING	VERMICOMPOSTING
What type of materials do I want to compost?	Fresh and dried yard debris, kitchen scraps, paper products	Kitchen scraps, paper products	Kitchen scraps, paper products
What type of space do I have to compost in?	Outdoor area with additional space around the bin for turning and harvesting	Apartment or condo, limited yard space	Apartment or condo, limited yard space
How much effort do I want to put in?	Low effort, infrequent maintenance (turning and watering when convenient)	Engaged effort, frequent maintenance (turning and watering regularly)	Low-moderate effort, moderate maintenance (maintaining consistent food and moisture supply)
How soon do I want a finished product?	Finished compost expected in 6-18 months	Finished compost expected in 3-6 months	Finished worm castings expected in 3-4 months

COMPOST BINS

A compost bin will help to keep your compost pile neat and tidy, deter rodent entry, and retain heat and moisture during decomposition. Compost bins kept in the shade are less likely to require frequent watering. Ideally, bins are placed on soil to invite a community of beneficial decomposers into the pile.

HOMEMADE BINS

Homemade bins can be easily constructed out of wood, wire mesh, scrap pallets, and other materials commonly found around the home. To get a set of plans for building your own traditional backyard bin or worm bin visit solanacenter.org/ciy



PURCHASED BINS

Purchased bins come in a variety of styles. They can be purchased at nurseries and garden centers, or ordered directly from the manufacturer. To see examples of the different types of composting bins, visit one of the composting demonstration gardens around the County. For a list of sites, visit solanacenter.org/ciy

Contact your city to see if they offer low-cost bins for their residents. Or visit solanacenter.org/vouchers or solanacenter.org/store to purchase bins.

COMPOSTING BASICS

There are four basic ingredients required for composting: GREENS, BROWNS, WATER, & AIR. Mixing the proper amounts of these ingredients together will provide the composting organisms with enough nitrogen, carbon, moisture, and oxygen to break down the materials efficiently.

GREENS + BROWNS + WATER + AIR

GREENS are fresh organic materials that serve as sources of nitrogen. Greens are the primary energy source of the active microorganisms, and are useful as a supplementary source of moisture in the pile.

BROWNS are dried or dead organic materials that serve as sources of carbon. Browns are useful for retaining moisture, creating small air pockets, and supporting a more diverse community of decomposers in the pile.

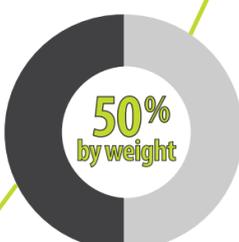
WATER helps ensure efficient processing of organics. Ideally, the pile is kept as moist as a wrung-out sponge. Too little moisture will inhibit decomposition, but too much water can produce smelly, anaerobic conditions.

AIR is essential for an earthy-smelling compost pile. Turning your compost pile regularly will help to inhibit the growth of odor-causing anaerobic bacteria, and will result in faster decomposition.

WHAT GOES IN THE COMPOST PILE?

50% GREENS

Fresh yard trimmings, fresh grass clippings, fresh or moldy fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee grinds, tea leaves, breads, certain types of manure*



50% BROWNS

Woody materials, dead or dried yard debris, chopped branches and twigs, bark, straw, sawdust, coffee filters, tea bags, shredded paper and paper products

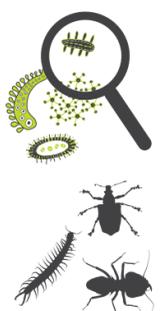
*For more information on composting with manure, visit solanacenter.org/ciy

COMPOST CRITTERS

A handful of compost contains more decomposer organisms than there are people on the planet. These amazing little creatures are responsible for making the whole composting process happen.

MICROORGANISMS (like bacteria and fungi) do the majority of decomposition work. Although too small to see, they are on everything you throw into the compost pile.

MACROORGANISMS (like insects, worms, and grubs) are large enough to see. They usually enter the compost pile from the surrounding landscape in the later stages of decomposition.



WHAT STAYS OUT OF THE COMPOST PILE?

Meat, fish, poultry, & bones
Eggs & dairy products

Charcoal or firelog ashes
Treated wood products

Dog, cat, & human feces
Glossy/coated paper

Oils, grease, & lard
Inorganic materials

Fresh weeds with mature seeds (unless building a hot compost pile)



THE COMPOSTING CONTINUUM

Composting occurs on a spectrum; once you have the four ingredients, it is the amount of attention that you pay to the pile that determines its level of activity and how quickly it will yield finished compost.

MORE PASSIVE

Slower Decomposition

MORE ACTIVE

Faster Decomposition

COOL COMPOSTING

MATERIALS

You can start the process with any volume of compostables. Do not add weed seeds or diseased plants. Bury food scraps in the core of pile to deter pests.

MAINTENANCE

Turning and adding water to the pile are done at your leisure, remembering aeration and moisture increase efficiency. The temperature of your pile may be 80°F or cooler.

BIOLOGY

There may be no heat-loving bacteria present, but your pile will host a diverse community of macroorganisms. You may even notice some seeds sprouting in the pile.

TIMELINE

Stop adding material several months before you plan to harvest. Expect finished compost in 6-18 months, correlated to your time and labor investments in the pile.

ACTIVE COMPOSTING

MATERIALS

The more materials you start with, the more heat will be produced. Do not add weed seeds or diseased plants. Bury food scraps in the core of pile to deter pests.

MAINTENANCE

Turning should be done with some regularity (approx. once or twice a month), water as needed to ensure even dampness. An efficient active pile operates between 80°F- 130°F.

BIOLOGY

As pile temperature rises, populations of heat-loving microorganisms will grow. As the pile cools, you will notice more macroorganisms and possibly some seed sprouts.

TIMELINE

Stop adding material 2-3 months before you plan to harvest. Expect finished compost in 5-6 months, correlated to your time and labor investments in the pile.

HOT COMPOSTING

MATERIALS

Starting with a large volume of material (try filling the bin) helps ensure a rapid temperature spike. Weed seeds will be deactivated by even heat distribution throughout the pile. Bury food scraps in the core of pile to deter pests.

MAINTENANCE

Routine turning and watering (approx. once a week). A pile is considered "hot" at 131°F and above. As the pile cools, aerate and add water to re-spike the temperature.

BIOLOGY

Hot piles are dominated by hard-working, but short-lived, communities of heat-loving bacteria. You will not see macroorganisms in the pile until it reaches a cooler phase.

TIMELINE

You will add almost all of your materials at the initial set-up of the bin. Expect finished compost in 3-4 months.

For more information on hot composting, visit www.solanacenter.org/ciy

EFFICIENCY TIPS ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

- LOCATION** Placing your bin on soil allows critical decomposers to access the pile. A shady location for the bin helps to conserve water, as pile contents won't dry out as rapidly.
- MIX IT UP** A greater diversity of inputs will produce a greater diversity of nutrients in the finished product. Don't be afraid to experiment with unconventional compostables (i.e. pet hair/fur/feathers)!
- CHOP IT UP** Smaller particle size (approx. 1 in.³) increases surface area of materials, and encourages faster decomposition, especially useful with woody and fibrous materials.
- "CAP" IT** Keeping a layer of browns (pine needles, burlap, straw, or cardboard) on top of the pile seals in moisture and deters pests like fruit flies and rodents from accessing food scraps.



VERMICOMPOSTING BASICS

Worms used for composting are different than the large earthworms commonly found burrowing in San Diego backyards. Red Wiggler worms are smaller, and are well-adapted to the conditions inside a vermicompost bin. Unlike the earthworms that freely enter a traditional compost system, vermicompost worms must be intentionally added to a worm bin. Red Wiggler worms are voracious eaters, consuming up to half their body weight in organic material every day and excreting it in the form of castings, a nutrient rich soil amendment that plants love. Besides the bin itself, four basic ingredients are required for vermicomposting: BEDDING, FOOD, WATER, & AIR. These elements help to maintain an environment where both Red Wiggler worms and their composting associates will thrive.

BEDDING + FOOD + WATER + AIR

BEDDING The primary materials added to the bin during set-up, bedding provides a medium for the worms to move through that will not get compacted, can hold moisture, and is easily digestible. All bedding material will eventually be processed into castings.

FOOD The majority of inputs should be fruit and vegetable scraps (chopped small), which will eventually be processed into castings. Food should be provided regularly and always buried in the bedding. See Worm Menu for more details.

WATER Worms require a moist environment to survive. While building, slowly add water to the bin until you achieve the moisture level of a wrung-out sponge. Use a spray bottle to add moisture as needed.

AIR Worms and supportive microbial populations need air in order to survive. Too little air or too much water results in smelly, anaerobic conditions.

SETTING UP YOUR BIN

To get started, you need to make or purchase a bin specifically designed for vermicomposting. These bins are generally 10" to 15" deep, opaque, have a tight fitting lid, and have holes drilled in the bottom and sides for drainage and ventilation. Create a damp bedding for your worms by soaking and wringing out torn newspaper, napkins, paper towels, and/or coconut coir. The amount of bedding you add will determine the amount of castings you will receive, but aim for at least 6 inches of depth. Add your worms and a handful of food scraps to the bedding, burying food below the surface. Feed your worms slowly at first, and gradually increase the amount of food scraps you provide. With good conditions, the worms will eat and reproduce rapidly. Worm communities are self-regulating and will adapt population size to available space and food resources. Worm bins operate optimally at an internal temperature of 55°F-75°F, but must be kept between 35°F-90°F to ensure worm survival. Keeping a bin indoors or locating an outdoor bin in the shade will help moderate temperature.

WORM MENU

FREELY ADD	ADD IN SMALL PORTIONS	AVOID ADDING
Fruit and vegetable pieces and peels (chopped)	Citrus pieces and peels	Inorganic materials (i.e. plastic, metal, glass)
Coffee grounds and filters, tea bags	Spicy foods (i.e. onions, hot peppers)	Meat, poultry, fish, and bones
Moldy fruits, vegetables, and breads	Plain bread, cereal, and pasta	Dairy products
Egg shells	Miscellaneous plate scrapings	Very oily foods
Shredded paper products	Leaves and yard waste	Very salty foods

VERMICOMPOST CRITTERS

Your bin will host not just Red Wiggler worms, but an entire community of decomposer organisms. Bacteria, fungi, and other microorganisms will naturally enter the bin and assist with decomposition. Outdoor worm bins are likely to attract small groups of macroorganisms, including potworms, pill bugs, sow bugs, and slugs. All of these organisms are beneficial, and will co-exist with the worm community. Red centipedes are the exception, and should be removed to prevent predation on the resident worms.

HARVESTING & USING YOUR COMPOST



HARVESTING FINISHED COMPOST

CURING Your compost is almost finished when the original inputs are unrecognizable, having been transformed into a dark brown, crumbly soil product with a pleasant, earthy aroma. Even when the materials appear to be fully decomposed, allow 2-4 weeks for the compost to cure. The curing phase is a period of rest during which compost contents stabilize and mature. While curing, aim to keep the pile contents evenly moist, but do not add any new compostables.

SCREENING Once your compost has finished curing, it is ready to harvest. There may be a few chunks of woody material left in your finished compost, as these are generally slower to break down. Large pieces can be screened out and used as mulch or placed in the next batch of compost to continue decomposing. Screening can be done by hand or with the use of hardware mesh.



HARVESTING FINISHED WORM CASTINGS

VERMICOMPOST VS. CASTINGS Vermicompost is a mixture of worm castings and decomposed or partially decomposed organic matter that has not been digested by the worm. Castings are worm manure. If none of the original materials are recognizable, the bin composition is mostly castings, and is ready to harvest. Both vermicompost and castings are viable soil amendments.

SEPARATING WORMS Your finished castings will be ready to harvest in about 3-4 months. When harvesting, try to keep as many worms in the bin as possible. To separate your worms from the castings, place food in one area of the bin only. Most of the worms will migrate toward the food, leaving the rest of the bin full of largely worm-free castings. Start the process over by adding fresh bedding and food to the side of the bin that was just harvested. For more information on a variety of methods to harvest castings, visit www.solanacenter.org/ciy

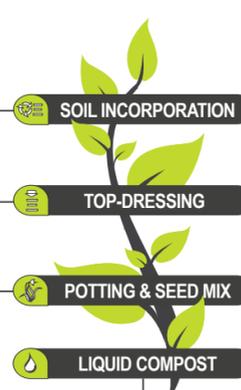


USING FINISHED COMPOST

Mixing compost into soil helps to improve its structure, and increases nutrient levels and water holding capacity. Spread 2 to 4-inches of compost over the soil and turn it in with a shovel to a depth of about 6 inches. This is the most common use for compost.

Top dress your planters by spreading compost to a depth of 3-inches around the base of plants and shrubs.

Finished compost is an essential addition to mixes for growing containerized plants, seedlings, or transplants. An adjustable recipe is: 20% traditional compost, 20% castings, 30% coconut coir & 30% sandy soil.



USING FINISHED CASTINGS

Worm castings are very nutrient dense. A little goes a long way! Castings are generally mixed into the soil at a 4:1 or 5:1 soil to castings ratio. Castings can be added to the bottom of a transplant hole, or worked into the soil surrounding established plants.

Castings can be added near the soil surface, but exposed castings will dry, harden and become less accessible to the root systems. Instead, crumble up the castings, and water them into the surface soil.

Vermicompost and finished castings make excellent ingredients in mixes for growing containerized plants, seedlings, or transplants. An adjustable recipe is: 20% traditional compost, 20% castings, 30% coconut coir & 30% sandy soil.

The nutrients in compost and worm castings can be applied to plants in liquid form. Leachate, or liquid traveling through unfinished decomposing matter, can be diluted to the color of iced tea, and used as a soil drench. Tea is made by soaking or steeping finished compost or castings in water. Water your houseplants, transplants, and seedlings with the liquid to give them a good start and keep them healthy. For more information on leachate, compost tea and worm tea, visit www.solanacenter.org/ciy

TROUBLESHOOTING

THE PROBLEM	THE CAUSE	THE SOLUTION
Compost smells offensive	Anaerobic conditions (not enough air)	Turn the pile, add more browns to the pile
Pile doesn't heat up	Pile too small, too dry and/or not enough greens	Add more greens to the pile, add water while turning
Material isn't breaking down quickly	Not enough moisture and/or large material size	Add water, chop materials into smaller pieces
Pile is attracting ants	Pile too dry, food scraps not buried	Add water, bury all food scraps in core of pile
Excessive flies and/or rodent foraging	Food scraps exposed, wrong ingredients	Bury food scraps in core, do not add meat, dairy, or oils

*Don't fret!
Composting is a very forgiving process, and any problems that arise are often easily corrected.*

COMPOSTING COMPLEMENTS

GRASSCYCLING is a quick and easy way to recycle your grass clippings and fertilize your lawn at the same time! It saves time and money, reduces the need for frequent watering and chemical fertilizers, and promotes healthy lawn growth. Grasscycling is simple: just take the bag off your mower and leave the grass clippings on the lawn. The nitrogen-rich clippings decompose quickly, adding nutrients to the soil and helping your lawn retain water.

MULCH is different from compost in the way that the materials are processed and used. While compost is fully decomposed material that can be used as a soil amendment, mulch is uncomposted material that is spread over the surface of the soil. Using mulch has many benefits: prevents soil erosion, reduces evaporation, and inhibits weed growth. It has even been shown to reduce the incidence of certain plant diseases. The best way to apply mulch is to touch a layer approximately 3-inches thick around the base of plants. Take care to keep the mulch from touching the base of plant stems or trunks.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

COMPOSTING IS BEST LEARNED BY DOING. WITH EXPERIENCE, YOU WILL LEARN WHAT WORKS BEST FOR YOU. FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION...

CALL THE ROTLINE

(760) 436-7986 ext 700

A hotline for all your composting questions!

FOR MORE RESOURCES

Visit Solana Center's composting demo site at
137 N. El Camino Real, Encinitas, CA 92024
or check out our website
www.solanacenter.org/ciy

