



Backyard Composting: A Beginner's Guide

Good soil is crucial for growing healthy plants. The best soil is full of organic material, carbon-rich matter formed from anything that once lived. Organic matter is important for making nutrients available to plants and encouraging beneficial microbial life in the soil.

COMPOSTING is a process that converts food scraps and yard waste — such as leaves and grass clippings — into useful, nutrient-rich soil amendment. A compost bin is the perfect complement to your backyard garden!

GETTING STARTED

Once you have your tools and ingredients composting is simply a matter of adding materials to your bin in the right quantities. Think of it as a green and brown lasagna! Follow the steps below to start.



What do I need?

- A standard plastic compost bin or a homemade bin made from timber, chicken wire, etc.
- Garden fork, compost turner or some kind of poking tool
- Green organic ingredients
- Brown organic ingredients

Watch [this video](#) for a composting demonstration.

Source: Nelson City Council

1

Position your bin somewhere where you will have easy access from your kitchen. Place in half sun, half shade for the best results. The warmer the location, the faster the compost will work. Make sure to line the bottom with hardware cloth to minimize pests.

2

Create your first layer with dry shredded leaves and twigs: Place the brown ingredients at the bottom and water thoroughly. The water encourages bacterial growth, which will allow your material to start breaking down.

3

Your second layer includes green ingredients: Add a layer of clippings, plant scraps or other green material so that it is roughly the same thickness as your first brown layer.

4

Additionally, you can add a thin layer of soil from your garden. Soil contains useful microorganisms to kick start your compost.

5

As you go, continue to add brown and green ingredients in equal volumes; see chart for what ingredients are considered brown and green. Mix the pile.

6

When your bin is full, you will want to stop adding materials, so the compost can finish. Producing finished compost generally takes three to six months. Your compost is ready when it looks like rich, dark soil. You can slide up the lower door or tilt the bin and scrape away the finished compost at the bottom, or lift off the bin and start a new pile.

Tips and Tricks

Break up ingredients

By breaking up your ingredients into smaller pieces, you'll allow your compost to decompose faster and speed up the pace of composting.

Keep the air flowing

Keeping it aerated helps to speed up the composting process. To achieve this, turn your pile over or poke holes in it every few weeks with garden fork, metal post or a compost turner. Dry shredded leaves or shredded newspaper also help to create space in your compost that holds air.

Store materials

Prepare a bucket of your brown material ahead of time. This way you will have the material handy when you go to add your new batch of green material from the kitchen or garden.

Ratio of Greens to Browns

Start with equal portions using half green and half brown materials at first. Then, as you gain confidence, alter your ratio based on the conditions of the pile.

NEVER COMPOST

Stay away from these materials as they will cause your compost pile to smell, attract animals and/or contaminate your finished compost with chemicals and weeds.

- Plastics
- Metals
- Chemicals (including clippings from treated grass)
- Weeds with seeds
- Diseased plants
- Meat
- Dairy
- Oily foods
- Human / dog / cat waste
- Glossy paper
- Treated lumber or sawdust

Trouble-shooting

Having problems with your compost? Check out the chart below to see what you can do!

Symptoms	Possible Cause	Solutions
Unpleasant odor from pile	Not enough oxygen/compaction	Aerate by stirring pile or put in big sticks to help with airflow
	Not enough oxygen/too wet	Mix in dry materials
Ammonia smell	Too much nitrogen	Mix in dry brown materials
Pile not heating up	Lack of nitrogen	Mix in some greens
	Not enough moisture	Water pile
	Pile needs to be turned	Use a pitchfork, turn outside to center
	Compost may be finished	Remove finished compost and start over
Pests are found in the bin	Gnats (these will not harm anything but can be annoying)	Try adding a layer of brown to the top
	Mammals	Line the bottom of the pile with hardware cloth or use plastic bin with locking lid