

Composting Tips

By: Extension Door County

Compost has been a hot topic for a while for good reason. What can be better than turning waste into something beneficial? But before you start throwing food scraps into a pile on your property line, here are some considerations to take to ensure you have a successful compost pile and don't attract vermin or strain neighborly relationships.

1. **Determine your goal for the compost pile.** Do you just want a place to recycle vegetable scraps? Do you want to quickly get compost to use in your garden? Are you willing to put in time and effort to maintain the pile? Or are you patient and willing to wait a couple years before the compost is ready? This will help you decide the best bin/pile design and what plant materials to add.
2. **Pick a convenient location.** Site location can determine whether you follow through with composting or give up. Briefly said, we tend to be lazy. I had access to a friend's compost pile, but it required me to store vegetable scraps in a bucket and then drive them to the pile. I did that about twice, and then I kept forgetting to bring the bucket. Eventually the bucket was so disgusting that I didn't even want to open it, so I threw away the whole thing. That said, pick a spot that is easy and convenient to access.
3. **Recognize who/what is doing the work.** Yes, it may require walking a few feet get that banana peel into a particular spot, but it's really the microorganisms that steal the show. Three types of microbes are present in compost piles: bacteria, actinomycetes, and fungi. These microbes, along with some macro-organisms including worms and insects, consume and break down the organic matter to make it ready for our gardens.
4. **Keep the compost pile moist.** Microbes need water, so if the pile is completely dry, they are not active. Fifty to sixty percent moisture is ideal. One way to test the moisture is to take a handful of compost, and if you really squeeze it, a few drops of water should drip out. You can adjust your watering schedule from there depending whether it is too wet or too dry.
5. **Turn the compost pile about once a week.** Microbes in compost need oxygen to work. Turning the pile speeds up decomposition and will make sure everything you add to the pile is mixed in and broken down. When building a compost pile, remember to leave space to turn it or move it from bin to bin.
6. **It's going to get hot in there.** Or at least it should. Microbial action produces heat. If the microbes are getting a balanced diet, have access to oxygen, and adequate moisture, then the core of the pile should heat up. The heat can help kill off weed seed or plant pathogens.
7. **Know your browns and greens.** If you've looked into composting in the past, you've probably heard of the browns to greens ratio. Browns are dried plant material. Examples are dried leaves, dried grass clippings, wood chips, fur, hair, feathers, etc. Greens are materials including fresh grass clippings, fruit and vegetable scraps, weeds, manure, fresh hay, coffee grounds, etc. The

rule of thumb is to add 2 parts browns with 1 part greens. This ratio is determined based on the relative amount of carbon and nitrogen in the materials. The ideal diet for the microbes is about 30 parts carbon to 1 part nitrogen, which is equivalent to about 2 parts browns to 1 part greens.

8. **Know what to avoid.** There is a huge difference between what you CAN compost and what you SHOULD compost. Yes, it is true that human feces can be composted. But please do not add that to a backyard compost pile! Do not add any meat, bones, fat, dairy products, dog, cat, or human waste, oil, charcoal or fireplace ash, whole branches or logs, thorny plants, or anything treated with pesticides. Unless you know your compost pile heat up to over approximately 130°F, avoid any invasive weeds, weeds with lots of seeds, or diseased plants.
9. **If it smells bad, something is wrong.** Well-cared-for compost piles should not smell bad. If you are noticing a stench, first make sure the compost pile isn't too wet. Second, make sure you are adding enough browns in the pile. To fix these issues, fluff up the compost to increase airflow and help it to dry, and either hold back on some of the greens for a bit or add browns to even things out.
10. **Compost must be fully cured (stabilized) before you use it.** If microbes are still breaking down materials within the compost, they are going to use up any available nutrients for themselves, leaving your newly-planted garden starved for nutrients. Once the compost no longer heats up when turned, let it sit another month and it is ready to go. You might find some larger sticks or pieces of eggshell left in your cured compost, but otherwise there shouldn't be any recognizable materials and it should smell earthy.