

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) About Composting

What should I or shouldn't I add to my compost pile?

You'll find more complete lists of what you should and shouldn't add to your compost in your *Home Composting* brochure.

Do add: yard trimmings, garden debris, vegetable and fruit scraps, coffee grounds and filters, and horse, cow, chicken, and rabbit manure.

Do not add: meats, fish, oily foods (these are likely to attract unwanted pests), milk products, and pet manures (except for manure from pets that are herbivores such as rabbits, sheep, and chickens--their manure is a great source of nitrogen). Diseased or insect infested plants and weeds that have gone to seed also should not be added.

Materials that you can or can't add to your compost pile depend partly on the health regulations in your area:

- Ask your township or borough if they have regulations on composting food scraps. They may require a covered bin or may not allow food scraps composting outdoors.

How do I keep pests out of my compost?

✓ To help keep pests out of an open pile, turn food scraps into the pile as you add them, covering them with yard trimmings.

✓ Make or buy a bin that is pest resistant: one that has a lid & has air holes small enough to keep out small pests.

✓ **If you're having pest problems, try composting food scraps in alternative ways:** you might bury food scraps in your garden, use a compost cone built specially for food scraps, build a worm bin for indoor composting of food scraps, buy or make a barrel composter, or make a trash can compost bin.

Should I put my compost in the sun or shade?

✓ It's best in the shade because the compost is less likely to dry out: dry compost does not decay.

How long does it take to compost?

✓ Depending on how carefully you manage your pile for the correct conditions, composting takes from 1 month to 2 years.

✓ A pile turned every week or so and carefully managed for all the right conditions may compost in a month or two.

✓ A pile not turned or managed will take about six months to two years to fully compost.

✓ **It is not essential to compost quickly.** It's really up to you if you want compost for your garden as soon as possible or if you'd rather wait for nature to run its course. Just be sure to compost responsibly and turn your pile if it starts to give off foul odors.

Do I need to shred or grind organic materials to compost them?

✓ Shredding or grinding organic materials helps speed composting by increasing the surface area of the compostables, making them accessible to decomposers. But shredding is not essential, except when adding woody materials such as sticks that will take years to decompose unless they are shredded.

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✓ One word of caution: shredded and ground materials tend to have less air flowing through them, so they should be turned more often if you are an active composter.

Should I add inoculents and activators/accelerators?

✓ Inoculents and activators are not recommended. Inoculents are microscopic decomposers, and they are naturally found in the source materials you add to your pile, such as leaves and grass. They are abundant in soil, finished compost, and manures. Just 1 teaspoon of fertile soil with compost regularly added to it has 100 million bacteria and 400-800 feet of fungal threads, according to a soil ecologist at Oregon State University.

✓ Accelerators are generally a quick fix of nitrogen that won't last long and are a potential source of water pollution as they are easily washed out of your pile into surface and ground water. If you need to add high nitrogen "greens" to your pile, organic sources like grass clippings, manure, food scraps or even bone meal give a slow release of nitrogen and are better for composting.

Should I add lime to my pile?

✓ Do not add lime to a pile because it may cause nitrogen to be released from the pile as ammonia gas. This gas smells bad and leaves your compost with less nitrogen, an important plant nutrient for your garden.

✓ You don't need to worry about the pH of a compost pile. pH, being a measurement of alkalinity or acidity, will generally adjust itself and, when compost is mature, the pH is usually around neutral (7).

✓ If you need to adjust the pH of compost, do this after it has completed its composting. First test the pH of your finished compost and adjust it as needed.

How do I know when the materials are done composting? And what can I use the compost for?

How you plan to use your compost determines how mature or "done" it should be:

✓ Compost used for mulch can be partly decomposed. It's ok if you still recognize some of the source materials you put into the pile. Use the compost as a surface mulch on garden soils or flowerbeds and around trees and shrubs.

✓ Partly decomposed non-woody compost can be added as a conditioner to your garden soils in the fall, giving the materials time to finish decaying before you plant in the spring.

✓ Mature compost can be used for making compost tea (not for human consumption). To do this, put mature compost in cheesecloth or an old rag and soak it in water until the water is the color of weak tea. The tea can be used to add nutrients to house and garden plants.

✓ For incorporating compost into your soil during the growing season, for planting trees, for use as a lawn top dressing, or for establishing a new lawn, you want to make sure that your compost is "mature," meaning:

- it is reduced to about 1/3 of its original volume
- it is dark, crumbly, earthy smelling (not smelling like ammonia or rotten eggs), and the original materials are not recognizable
- the temperature of a pile is within 10 degrees F of the outdoor temperature (not hot and steamy)
- **For these more sensitive uses, it is best to first test out the compost in a small area to be sure it is mature enough to not damage the plants or prevent germination.**