

DIY Composting

Urban Horticulture

www.pinellascountyextension.org

Theresa Badurek, UF/IFAS Extension, Pinellas County

What is compost? It's the rich, dark, broken down organic matter created when the right waste materials are decomposed by a variety of micro-organisms. Compost is full of nutrients needed for plant growth and helps hold moisture in your garden soil. These are very important services, especially here in our dry, sandy, nutrient-poor soils in Florida.



PHOTO: UF/IFAS

Composting is an excellent way to recycle all kinds of waste materials into a valuable resource for your garden. Not only will your plants thank you, but you will also reduce the amount of garbage that you make. It's a great way to "green" up your lifestyle and your garden!

How can I compost? Building a compost pile or bin can be done many different ways including a simple pile, a constructed unit, or even a fancy store-bought contraption. (To learn about building your own home compost unit, visit the resource link at the end of this fact sheet.) Here are some basic rules to follow for success:

- Locate the pile/bin in an area protected from wind and within reach of a hose (if it's in the shade you will be happier when working there)
- Consider screening it from views for you and the neighbors
- Check that the pile/bin measures a minimum of 3' high x 3' deep x 3' wide
- Cut up large pieces before composting- smaller pieces break down faster than large ones
- Layer equal amounts (you can "eyeball" this) of "greens" and "browns" in alternating 3"-4" layers (see the next section to learn more about this)
- Water each layer as you go- just to moisten, not to saturate
- Avoid composting weeds with seeds or plants with diseases

What are "greens" and "browns"? These are the two main ingredients you need to make compost happen. The "greens" are rich in nitrogen and the "browns" are rich in carbon. The best possible ratio of "browns" to "greens" (or C/N) is 30:1 or less, in alternating layers as described above. Here are a few examples:

Greens

- kitchen scraps
- farm animal manure
- grass clippings
- herbaceous plants

IMPORTANT! Raw manure must be applied/composted at least 90 days before harvesting a crop where the edible portion is not in contact with the soil (e.g., sweet corn) and at least 120 days before harvesting a crop where the edible portion does touch the soil (e.g., watermelons, potatoes).

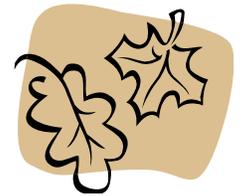
Browns

- fallen leaves
- twigs/chipped branches
- shredded newspaper/cardboard/ paper

How do I manage a compost pile/bin? The most important thing you need to do to keep the little micro-organisms working for you is to make sure they have air, water, and food. You do this by turning and watering (if it gets dry) your pile occasionally. Compost will heat up at first and eventually cool down. Turning the pile allows you to mix the materials which will allow the pile to heat up again. The hotter the pile gets, the more quickly it breaks down into compost. You can even take your compost pile's temperature with a long thermometer. The ideal temperature range is between 122-131 degrees Fahrenheit. Compost is ready to use when it's dark brown and crumbly.

I made compost! Now what? Compost is an excellent soil amendment that will add nutrients to your soil and help retain soil moisture. If you still have large pieces in your compost you can simply screen those out before use. The big pieces go back in the bin for more decomposing. Your finished compost can be added to your garden soil before planting or used on the surface like mulch. You can even use compost for a potting mix if you blend very fine compost with coarse sand to improve drainage.

What can I compost?



DO Compost:

Greens:

Banana skins
Kitchen scraps
Spent/processed grains
Fruits and vegetables
Stale bread
Eggshells
Manures (cow, horse, chicken)
Citrus fruit and peels (cut up)
Coffee grounds

Tea bags
Weeds (without seeds)
Corn meal
Watermelon rind
Rice
Oatmeal
Bone meal
Feathers
Flowers
Grass clippings (untreated)

Browns:

Straw and hay
Dead insects
Old potting soil mix
Pine needles
Peanut shells
Wood shavings
Newsprint (b&w or soy ink)
Hair (human, animal)
Dryer Lint

Cardboard
Birdcage "stuff"
Wood chips
Shredded hardwood
Sawdust (not treated)
Paper (b&w or soy ink)
Dry leaves

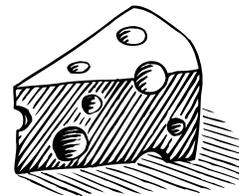
DO NOT Compost:

Meat, meat scraps
Human waste
Treated wood
Colored newsprint
Heavily colored paper
Particleboard
Grease, fat, oil

Whole bones
Poultry
Treated sawdust
Pressure treated wood
Pesticide treated plants
Seed-laden weeds
Dairy products

Used kitty litter
Dog and cat feces
Plywood
Mayonnaise
Butter
Cheese
Peanut Butter

Salad dressing
Vegetable oil
Yogurt
Milk



More composting resources:

Florida's Online Composting Center: <http://sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu/compost-info/>

Living Green composting website: <http://livinggreen.ifas.ufl.edu/waste/composting.html>

Compost Tips for the Home Gardener: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/EP/EP32300.pdf>

Compost Happens Tutorial: <http://sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu/compost-info/tutorial/>

Construction of Home Compost Units:

<http://polkhort.ifas.ufl.edu/documents/publications/Composter%20construction.pdf>