

COMPOSTING AT HOME IN 6 EASY STEPS

1. CHOOSE A COMPOSTING SYSTEM

Composting systems come in all shapes and sizes. Some gardeners just make a pile in a corner of their gardens. Whether you handcraft or buy a composter depends on preference and need. A three-bin system where you periodically turn the pile, allows the compost to go through all stages of decomposition, while providing plenty of space to add new material.



2. ADD DIVERSE MATERIALS

An active compost pile has a mixture of high nitrogen, moist materials called “greens” and drier, carbon-rich materials called “browns”.

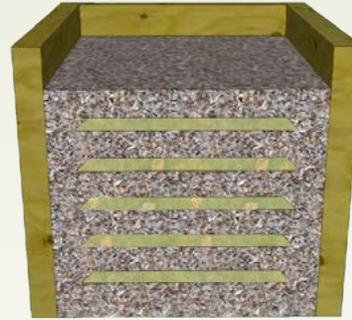
GREENS INCLUDE: Food scraps (such as fruit and vegetable peels, coffee grounds, tea bags and prepared foods), fresh grass clippings, fresh weeds and manures.

BROWNS INCLUDE: Dry weeds, straw, fallen leaves, shredded paper, sawdust and wood chips.

At a home compost scale, the “browns” that breakdown most effectively are dry weeds, straw and sawdust. Leaves tend to mat in a compost pile and woodchips may persist.

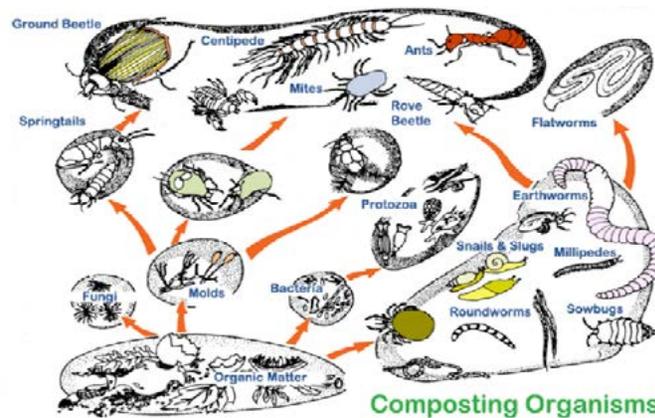
3. MAKE LAYERS

Add greens and browns in layers. Start with a layer of “browns,” this layer will help to absorb the moisture in the “greens”. Every time you add food scraps (“greens”), cover them with “browns” to balance your recipe and deter unwanted creatures from your compost pile or bin. A typical compost recipe requires 2-3 buckets of “browns” for every bucket of food scraps.



4. LET THE BUGS WORK!

Bacteria and fungi do most of the work in a compost pile. This is good news for you! They eat what we can't and the result is compost. During this process, microorganisms will ideally “heat” the compost pile. A pile that doesn't heat will still breakdown, it'll just take longer. Having enough food, air and moisture will help the bacteria to thrive and will speed up the decomposition process.



5. LET IT BREATHE

The organisms in a compost pile need oxygen! While not necessary, turning (or mixing) the pile twice a month will add air and speed up the breakdown of materials. Adding ingredients like wood chips (~10%) will assist in allowing air into the pile.

With a multi-bin system, turning the compost from one bin to the next aerates the pile and allows a new “batch” of compost to be created in the first bin. By the time the compost has been transferred to the third bin, it should be nearing the end of the decomposition process.

6. KEEP IT MOIST

Take a handful of material from the center of the pile and squeeze it. It should feel like a wrung out sponge and hold its shape after you squeeze it. If the pile is too wet, add some dry weeds, shredded newspaper or straw. If it's too dry, add some water or wet material.



Remember that every compost pile is unique. It may take time to create the right recipe for proper decomposition, so be patient and have fun!



WHAT IS COMPOSTING?

Composting is the decomposition of organic matter into a nutrient-rich soil amendment. Finished compost is an earthy humus-rich material that helps soil retain nutrients and moisture to improve plant growth.

WHY SHOULD I COMPOST?

Food scraps make up one third of a typical household's trash. When food scraps are sent to the landfill, they take up space in our limited landfills and contribute to increased production of methane and toxic leachate. If all the food scraps in Vermont were composted instead of being sent to the landfill, it would offset the same amount of carbon as not burning 12 million gallons of gasoline a year! By composting organic waste, [we close the loop on our food system](#). The valuable nutrients in our food scraps are used to regenerate soil and grow more food.

USING COMPOST

Compost is not a fertilizer! Although it contains many plant-available nutrients, compost is primarily a soil-conditioning amendment.

Apply compost when you are preparing your garden soil in the spring, or when you are putting your garden to bed in the fall. Compost is typically applied to gardens annually— a thin layer (1/2" - 2") can be spread on the garden and worked into the soil. You can also mulch with compost, which adds nutrients while preventing soil disturbance.

For potted plants, mix compost into your potting media at ~25% by volume. For seasonal maintenance, "top-dress" potted plants with a thin layer of compost.

Testing your soil for nutrient deficiencies and your compost for nutrient content will give you more precise information about how to improve your specific soil conditions. Using compost together with cover crops and organic fertilizers is a sustainable way to maintain your soil's fertility.



BENEFITS OF USING COMPOST

Compost can significantly improve soil quality and protect the environment in a number of ways:

- Improves soil structure
- Increases nutrient content in soil
- Improves moisture retention
- Increases soil aeration
- Remediate contaminated soil
- Reduces plant diseases and pests and thus reduces need for pesticides and fungicides
- Reduces or eliminates need for chemical fertilizers
- Improves organic matter and carbon in soils
- Reduces storm water runoff and soil erosion
- Feeds the "Soil Food Web"

The following resource uses or is adapted from content originally developed by the Highfields Center for Composting in Hardwick VT. The Highfields Center for Composting dissolved as an organization in December 2014 and ended its active involvement in the Close the Loop Program. The content has been made publically available for use in supporting organics management in Vermont and elsewhere through the generosity of the High Meadows Fund, the Harris and Frances Block Foundation, and the Vermont Community Foundation. The Vermont community wishes to thank the Highfields Center for Composting for its years of outstanding leadership in the service of community composting and universal recycling in Vermont. For more information about the use of Highfields related materials please contact jake@vsjf.org.

A guide to HOME COMPOSTING

