

Composting is easy!

We have all seen complicated diagrams showing almost mathematical formulas for composting, you must measure layers of twigs, leaves, grass clippings and kitchen waste, and then turn the heap at least once per week. This approach suggests that you need to spend hours calculating formulas and probably have some sort of science background. All of these charts, diagrams and formulas overwhelm many home gardeners.

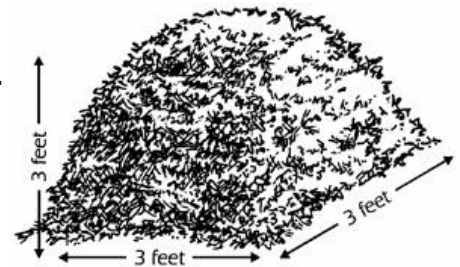
Some of us may have childhood memories of a compost pile in someone's garden. I know I do, it was a pile of grass clippings, deadheaded flowers, fruit and vegetable leftovers, etc. it was about 3-4 feet wide and about 3 feet tall, sometimes it was turned over with a fork other times no one touched it at all.

So let's look at the basics of composting. It is the ultimate in recycling. With very little effort and almost no expense, you can change vegetable and fruit peelings, grass clippings and garden waste into dark, rich, crumbly compost that adds organic material to your garden, saves you money on purchased soils or fertilizers and reduces the amount of waste your household produces.

What do you really need? Many advertisements convince composting novices to believe that an enclosed bin is essential. They come in many shapes and forms and can cost from \$21.85 for a black plastic composter from the Region of Peel to hundreds of dollars for complicated rotating drums. If you intend to compost outside you don't need an enclosed bin, you can just build a pile on the ground. Water it occasionally so the pile doesn't dry out, and if you feel inclined turn it or stir it up with a garden fork every 6-8 weeks.

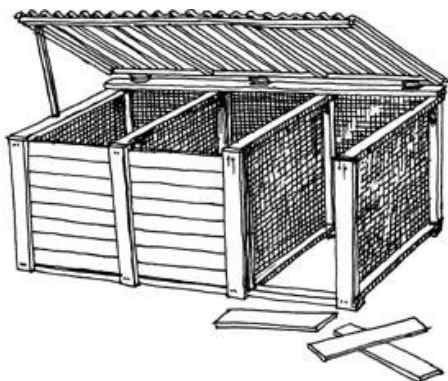
However, if you want your pile to be tidy, or if an open pile may upset neighbours an enclosure or bin is more presentable. So what choices are there?

You can use the ordinary black plastic cone; they don't work well for several reasons. They are plastic and degrade quite quickly making the plastic quite brittle and prone to damage from tools used to add or remove material.



Second; they are too small, raw materials break down very slowly in small spaces; Third; the small opening at the top makes it difficult to add raw materials and almost impossible to stir or turn the contents. Fourth; removing finished compost through the tiny door in the bottom is very awkward.

Rotating drums do work and quite well, however they are quite expensive, removing finished compost is difficult and they work best if the entire container is filled at the same time. This means that you need another location to store any materials that don't fit.



I have composted in my garden for 20+ years. I use an open 2 bin composter much like this picture of a 3 bin model. A lid is not necessary, but does add tidiness to the appearance. The boards on the front do need to be removable. The use of wire mesh for the other sides does reduce cost, but every time you put your fork in to stir up the compost I can guarantee that the tines will get stuck in the mesh.

What to put in your composter? All of your garden waste, grass clippings and leaves, small twigs, weeds but not those with flowers or seeds, all of your fruit and vegetable kitchen waste, egg shells and shredded newspaper.

What not to put in your composter? All forms of protein, meats, fish, bones plus fatty foods such as cheese, butter and cooking oils. Diseased plants or those that have been sprayed with herbicides or pesticide don't belong in a composter. Annual or perennial seed heads that germinate easily can be put in the compost but you may find them popping up all over your garden in future years. I don't put rose clippings in my compost because I always end up with thorns in my fingers.

How to compost? I add garden waste as it is produced so one day it may be grass clippings, another day deadheads, stems from cut back plants or fall leaves. Kitchen waste is added when my kitchen compost container is full, it doesn't have to be buried but if there is a lot of fruit debris you may find it attracts wasps or flies. Adding different types of material to a compost pile in varying proportions and layers is only possible if all of the materials are on hand at one time. Of course after you stir up or turn the compost it all gets mixed together anyway.

With a 2 bin composter one side is usually empty by the fall. Over the winter any kitchen waste is put in the empty side. I turn my compost in the spring when it is thawed and all I do is shovel it in to the empty side. New material added over the winter is put in the previously full side plus any undecayed material from the previous year. Sometimes I turn the compost in mid-summer, I always turn it in late fall after the leaves drop and all garden waste has been added. If you want to see a 2 bin composter at work we use one at the Leslie Log House.

I do have red wiggler worms in my outside composter. In winter they all clump together in a ball and keep each other warm.

Vermicomposting uses worms to do the work—you just need to bury your food waste under moistened bedding material. The bedding is made from shredded paper, dead leaves, or straw. It is an excellent option for those living in apartments or other small spaces. In southern Ontario vermicomposting must be done inside.

Red wigglers are best suited for home composting. They are comfortable living in an opaque box filled with bedding material, and will reproduce and happily eat your food waste. Worm castings are a rich, desirable amendment for everything in your garden.

There are several options for harvesting the finished compost. One of the simplest methods is to move all of the contents to one side of the bin, adding fresh, moistened bedding material and fresh food waste to the empty side. The worms will migrate over to the newer bedding over a period of several weeks, and you can harvest the finished side—worm-free. When vermicomposting, however, you'll need to keep all food scraps buried to keep fruit flies from becoming a nuisance.

These links provide more information on vermicomposting:

<http://www.cathyscomposters.com/> <http://www.wormcomposting.ca/>

From the Streetsville Horticultural Society newsletter November 2015

If you have garden questions please contact us at streetsvillehort@hotmail.com check out our website at www.streetsvillehort.ca