

Back Yard Composting For Beginners



Blog by [Kimberly Rotter](#) 5 months ago

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Have you thought about composting your household trash but didn't know how to get started? It's really easy. You can make compost right in your own back yard and it's nearly impossible to get it wrong. The best thing about it is the incredible amount of trash that gets recycled instead of added to our landfills.

Here are two easy composting styles. One is Tony's and the other is Fred's. They both love composting. Tony is meticulous and tidy. He's careful about what he composts and he tends to his compost bin every couple of days. Fred is more of a free spirit. He dumps just about anything in the compost pit and he harvests the "black magic" once a year. You can put in as much or as little effort as you want to.

What Is Compost?

According to Webster's, compost is a "mixture of various decaying organic substances, as dead leaves or manure, used for fertilizing soil." Although you start with stinky banana peels and dead leaves, you end up with a pleasant-smelling black soil that contains no recognizable scraps of any kind.

Compost begins as a blend of greens and browns. Greens are generally kitchen scraps and very fresh yard clippings. Browns are yard waste that has (you guessed it) turned brown. You want about 1/3 greens and 2/3 browns. Too much green or brown will slow the composting process down. Compost breaks down faster with more exposure to oxygen. Even if you don't achieve the perfect proportions, the more you turn your compost and expose it to the air, the better it will break down. If you have more or less the right proportions and you turn the heap frequently, you can make usable compost as quickly as every 2-3 weeks.

How Do I Make Compost?

Collect kitchen scraps in a container. You can use a low budget container like Fred's.

[image: plastic Folger's container with food scraps in it]

The downside to this type of container is that you will get flying bugs. Alternatively, you can purchase a 1-gallon stainless steel kitchen compost pail online for about \$40. The lid prevents accumulation of insects, and it holds a carbon filter, trapping any odors inside.



Before adding a larger food item, cut it into smaller pieces. It'll break down faster.

[image: cutting board, knife, banana peel cut into pieces]

Collect yard waste outside. Again, trim larger cuttings into smaller pieces.

[image: sticks, leaves, wood chipper]

Here's where you can start choosing the level of effort you want to put into this.

Fred throws everything in his compost pit out back. He moves a bottomless trash bin back and forth across the compost area. The fresh scraps and cuttings go in the bin.

[image: Fred's bottomless trash bin and compost area]

Keep the compost moist but not dripping wet. You can see (above) that Fred's compost pit is directly under the shed's roof line, for rain run-off. It's also at a low spot in the yard, so any water that hits the patio runs to the compost.

Tony uses the Cadillac of compost bins, a [Mantis Compost Tumbler](#). It, too, sits directly under a roof line that provides rain run-off. Excess moisture drains into the buckets below it. This is called "compost tea" and it's rich with nutrients. It's nature's version of Miracle Grow.

[image: compost tumbler, roof line, tea buckets]

Tony keeps browns and greens separate until he's ready to mix the two and start composting. When he has enough browns and greens for a batch of compost, Tony adds them to the tumbler, turns it every couple of days, and presto! Compost in 2 to 3 weeks.

[image: Tony adds material to tumbler]

Fred's compost gets turned every spring, so the process is slower. But the "black magic" that results under the surface is perfect compost nonetheless.

If you're using an outdoor pit like Fred's, just fill it up and then stop adding scraps and clippings to it. Turn it with a garden fork once a week. In a few weeks you'll have "black magic" for your plants, and you can start again. The end result should be a dark, moist top soil that has no foul odor or recognizable scraps. Since Fred only turns his compost annually, he tosses it through a ½ inch mesh. The stuff that falls through is his "black magic." The stuff that doesn't make it goes back into the pit.



What Should I Put In My Compost?

Our area has been known to host urban pests – rats, raccoons, possums. Tony doesn't want to attract any animals, nor does he want any super foul-smelling buckets of kitchen scraps sitting around our yard. So we don't put any meat or cooked food into our compost. Fred, however, discriminates against nothing. Anything degradable gets tossed into the bin. Here's what I recommend putting, and not putting, into your compost.

Yes!

Yard cuttings (Twigs, leaves)

Small amount of grass cuttings (Grass doesn't break down as well as leaves and twigs do. Too much will make your compost slimy.)

Coffee grounds

Eggs, egg shells

Hair

Fruit and vegetable rinds, peels, scraps and past-their-peak items that are starting to go bad

Tea bags, tag and all

Newspaper or white paper (Shredded, and in small amounts)

Paper towels, tissues

Urine (If you really have to go, the compost can use a little bit of ammonia)

NO!

Cooked food

Meat

Fat

Butter

Animal waste (can harbor disease)

Seeds and pits (you might grow plants you didn't want)

Corn cobs (they take eons to break down)

Where Can I Use My Compost?

Your compost can go anywhere you want nutrient-rich soil. It's safe for your vegetable garden and fruit trees, as well as flowers, shrubs and houseplants. Take a look at our cilantro, which exploded this spring.



And we got a few surprise guests in our lettuce box - poppies! Can't wait till they're bursting with orange blossoms!
[image: poppy buds]

The compost makes everything in our garden grow beautifully.



Happy composting!