

## **The Basics of Composting**

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Imagine being able to transform yard waste, kitchen scraps, and other organic materials readily found around the home, into rich fertile soil! You'll lighten the load in the bin that goes to the curb on garbage pickup day as well. Compostables (the term applied to waste products that can be turned into compost) are estimated to represent almost 40% of the average household waste. Better that these discards provide an "in-house" benefit than to haul them away to some distant location.

Composting, simply put, is providing an environment that allows bacteria and other small organisms that occur naturally to decompose what would otherwise be considered waste. It enables us to recycle these wastes back to the soil. A good location for composting is somewhere convenient to the source of your materials, whether in the kitchen or garden. In the kitchen, a covered bucket is handy for collecting food scraps. In your garden, a good average sized compost pile is about three square feet. You may simply make a pile or, if pests are a problem, a container or structure may be appropriate for your situation. Wherever you choose to locate your compost pile, remember that proper composting requires the circulation of air and the availability of water.

The simplest way to describe the ingredients that will go into your pile is to call the materials either brown or green. Brown materials are those which are high in carbon, such as dried leaves or brush; even shredded cardboard can be used. The green is the stuff that is high in nitrogen and starts the decomposition process when combined with water and air. Green materials include grass clipping, kitchen scraps, and manure. One should be cautioned not to use real slimy, gooey stuff or any human or pet waste.

To build a pile, simply put some brush or larger material on the ground followed by successive layers of green and brown materials. The ratio of each can be as high as twenty to one, carbon to nitrogen by volume. Manure is a favorable starter since it is "hot" or very high in nitrogen. The more nitrogen, the more likely you will produce a thermophilic reaction which simply means that the pile has reached a temperature in excess of 150 degrees, measured at the center of the pile. This not only speeds the composting process but also allows you to add weeds with the assurance that the seeds will be killed. Each layer should be thoroughly watered

Once the first stage is completed, let the bugs take over. You can even add a little dirt as it contains favorable organisms as well. Water and stir the pile to make sure that air is available throughout. Materials such as boards or large pieces of wood should be left out to allow optimum air and water circulation. Something like wood ashes that is powdery and prone to caking should be used sparingly. If odor becomes a problem, cover the pile with drier bulk material. An ammonia smell indicates an excess of nitrogen and signals that you should add more brown materials.

After a period of three to six months you should be rewarded for your efforts with finished

compost. It will be virtually odorless in its finished state and is usually the color of coffee grounds. Use the compost by adding it directly to your garden soil as an amendment or side dress established plants to give them a nutrient boost. Use it mixed with soil to pot up plants and save money on potting soil.

On Saturday, October 6, Master Gardeners present “Gardening with Succulents.” Learn how to grow and care for these wonderful plants. The class is offered at no charge and starts at 9:00 a.m. This class will be held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr., in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at [http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC\\_Master\\_Gardeners/](http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/). Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.

Do you have plastic feed sacks or plant containers to recycle? Master Gardeners will gladly take them at the Master Gardener Office. Call before dropping them off and thank you for the donation.