



Composting 101

by Billi Haug, UC Master Gardener, Master Composter

COMPOSTING IN THREE SIMPLE STEPS

STEP 1 – GATHER YOUR YARD WASTE

Yard waste is either fresh and moist, or old and dry. The fresh waste has a higher nitrogen content while the old, dry waste has a higher carbon content. When starting your compost system, it is best to combine both types of waste together (in a 50 – 50 ratio) to give the air-breathing bacteria and other decomposers a diet that will encourage their work.

In addition to yard waste, you can also compost food scraps, fruits & vegetables, coffee grounds, tea bags and egg shells. **DO NOT** compost meats, dairy products, or anything that can spoil. Try to grind or cut up materials before adding them to your system – they will break down much faster. Other items to avoid include dog/cat feces, large amounts of paper or ash and diseased material or weeds that have flowered and gone to seed.

STEP 2 – START YOUR COMPOST SYSTEM

Once you have gathered your fresh (nitrogen rich) and old (carbon rich) waste, you can combine both in layers to build your system. Water each layer before adding the next layer. Although not strictly necessary, you may also add some finished compost. This adds more of the microscopic decomposers that you want to put to work in your new system.

STEP 3 – MAINTAIN YOUR SYSTEM

Periodic aeration is key to faster composting. Use a pitchfork to turn your compost once every 10 days to produce compost in a 3 month period.

Composting materials should be kept moist like a wrung out sponge. Add water if your system is too dry or add some dry materials if your system is too wet.

Bury food scraps within the material to mask odors that might attract flies or rodents.

Continue to add fresh waste and food scraps throughout the life of your system. Space is constantly created as materials break down.

When you notice that your material looks about 50% broken down, stop adding new material to allow your compost to more completely decompose. Finished compost will look like a dark, dirt-like material and should smell wonderfully earthy. Once your compost is finished, let it rest two weeks, then screen out large chunks (these can go back into the system for the next batch). Rested and screened compost is ready to be used in your garden.

Originally prepared for the 2014 Sustainability Fair produced by the UC Master Gardener Program of Contra Costa County.