

# Backyard Composting



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## Why compost?

Rockland County faces major challenges in the area of solid waste management. With disposal costs rising at an unprecedented rate, communities are exploring alternative methods of handling wastes.

Yard and food waste comprise about 30% of residential waste by weight. Because these materials are organic, they can be composted. By composting organic materials, valuable landfill space is saved for materials that cannot be recycled or reused.

Backyard composting is preferable to municipal composting because transportation and processing costs are avoided. You can play a significant part in reducing the county's waste problem by learning to make compost.

## Misconceptions about composting

### A compost heap will smell bad?

FALSE. A well made compost pile will have a pleasant, earthy smell. On rare occasions, an odor may develop; it is easy to remedy by mixing the pile or adding coarse material.

### A compost pile will attract animals?

FALSE. Decomposing plant material does not attract animals or other wildlife. If you avoid adding meat scraps, bones, oils, fats and dairy products you should not have a problem.

### Composting is a difficult, technical process.

FALSE. Composting is as easy as you want it to be. Yard wastes may simply be piled in mounds and left to decompose over time without effort.

### Composting requires expensive containers & equipment.

FALSE. Composting is as simple as you make it.

### Special compost starters or bioactivators are needed to make composting work.

FALSE. There is no need for special compost starters. A few handfuls of soil scattered throughout the pile will do the job.

## Trouble Shooting

Although most people who practice composting never have a problem, occasionally difficulties arise. The following table will help you diagnose and solve any problems.

For further information, call the Cornell Cooperative Extension Diagnostic Lab at 845-429-7085.

## Trouble Shooting Guide

Symptoms	Problem	Solution
Center of the heap is dry	Not enough water	Moisten and mix
Pile is not getting warm	Too small Too dry Lack of greens Cold weather	Add material Moisten and mix Add greenery
Rotten odor	Not enough air Too wet	Mix pile or make smaller Add coarse items
Ammonia odor	Too many green items	Add sawdust, woodchips, leaves or straw
Animal or insect pests	Presence of meat scraps or fat	Avoid adding undesirable foods, cover with soil or

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## When is my compost finished?

Finished compost has a crumbly texture, a sweet earthy smell, and is dark in color-hence its name "gardener's gold". Tough fibers may still be intact. When the composting process has finished, the temperature in the pile should have dropped to the same temperature that is found outside the pile. Warmer temperatures indicate the process has not finished.

## What are the benefits of compost?

Compost is a valuable soil amendment to use in the garden and landscape. When added to clay or sandy soil it increases the soil's capacity to hold water.

Although it generally cannot take the place of regular fertilizers, it does supply small amounts of the major nutrients and a variety of minor nutrients to the soil.

## How can compost be used?

Compost can be spread over the soil in the fall or spring and mixed into the soil before planting.

Screened compost can be used in pots and patio containers; mix one part compost to two parts soil.

Compost can be spread in a thin layer on lawns as a top dressing. It decreases disease problems and improves the quality of the lawn. Compost used for this purpose should be screened first to remove any large debris. It may be applied with a fertilizer spreader.

## All about composting

Composting is easy. It's simply a matter of piling up the leaves, grass clippings and other plant wastes on your property so that they decompose into compost. It's a smart thing to do—it saves money for you and your town or village AND it improves Rockland County's environment.

Decomposition is a natural part of the cycle of living things. Bacteria, fungi and other organisms feed on organic matter, reducing it to compost. Composting simply speeds up Mother Nature's decay process.

A good compost pile will generate heat as the microorganisms break down the organic matter. When it is finished decomposing, the pile will cool down to normal temperature.

## Making a compost pile

Making a compost pile is not a difficult or technical process. In its simplest form, it involves piling leaves, grass clippings and other organic matter in an out-of-the-way part of the yard and letting nature take its course. When composting is done in this manner with no turning of the pile or further effort, it will take up to two years for the pile to complete the composting process.

If you would like to produce compost in less time, the following suggestions and the use of bins will help the process work more rapidly.

## Choosing a site

The best site for your compost pile is one that is accessible, yet out of the way. An area roughly 5' x 5' for each pile is the best. A shaded location is preferable though not necessary, as it will tend to keep the pile moist.

You may wish to have more than one pile, depending upon the size of your yard and the amount of material you have to process. Many people prefer to have at least two piles so that one may finish the composting process while they continue to add material to the other one.

## Compost these items

Basically, there are two types of materials to add to a compost pile.

### Brown Items

Leaves  
Woodchips  
Shredded paper  
Straw  
sawdust

### Green Items

Grass clippings  
Weeds & garden clippings  
Kitchen scraps  
Coffee grounds  
Cow or horse manure

Mix the brown and green yard wastes as they become available, sprinkling the pile occasionally with water. The pile should have the dampness of a wrung-out sponge and should be no higher than three or four feet.

A ratio of two parts brown material to one part green material is ideal but not absolutely necessary. Avoid thick layers of grass clippings which may cause an odor. Kitchen wastes should be buried at least 6" deep.

To speed up the decomposition process, sprinkle soil or finished compost on the pile AND mix at least once a year.

Shredding leaves with a leaf shredder or running over them with the lawn mower before adding to the compost pile will reduce the volume and speed up the process.

## DO NOT compost these items

Meat scraps, bones and oils  
Fatty foods and dairy products  
Cat or dog feces  
Diseased plants  
Weeds with many seeds  
Enduring weeds such as quackgrass, nutsedge, Japanese bamboo, wild onions or poison ivy

## Composting methods

There is no ideal way to compost. There are many different methods that can be selected, based on a resident's particular needs. Below are some suggested approaches.

### Compost Mound

It is not necessary to construct a compost bin. Simply pile your yard waste in a mound 3' to 5' wide by 3' or 4' high. If you cover the pile with a thin layer of soil it will speed the composting process.



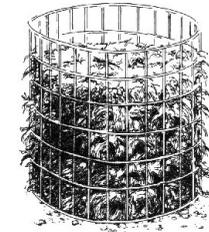
**Materials:** None

**Advantages:** Easy, inexpensive

**Disadvantages:** Decomposition may be slow if the pile is not mixed, taking one to two years for finished compost. Some people prefer the appearance of a more formal bin.

### Wire Mesh Bin

A free-standing wire mesh cylinder is easy to build and will speed the composting process. Vinyl coated wire mesh, available at most garden centers and home improvement stores, is recommended for durability. Wooden or metal posts will increase stability but make the bin more difficult to move.



If you choose to mix the compost, it is easy to lift the bin, place it beside the heap and use a pitchfork to toss the partially finished compost back into the bin.

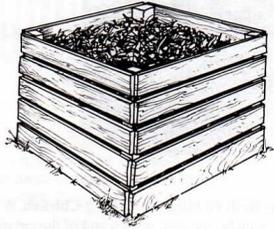
**Materials:** 12' to 15' of vinyl coated wire mesh, either 3' or 4' tall, mesh size approximately 2' x 3'; a bin about 4' in diameter is best. Four 8' fencing stakes

**Advantages:** Easy to build and inexpensive. Faster composting than mound method: one year if not mixed; 3 or 4 months if mixed.

**Disadvantages:** some residents prefer a bin with a more refined appearance.

## Wooden Bin

This attractive composting bin, made of pressure-treated two-by-fours, is easy to build and durable. The corners of the bin are secured with reinforcing rods which are inserted through drill holes. The fourth corner rod is loosely inserted so that the boards on one side, which are woven together, can be swung aside to form a doorway. The door facilitates mixing of the pile if desired.



**Materials:** 21 eight foot two-by-fours; use pressure treated wood for longer bin life. Four 4' reinforcing rods.

**Advantages:** Easy to build and inexpensive. Attractive, more refined appearance. Faster composting than mound method, similar to wire bin.

**Disadvantages:** more expensive to construct than mound or wire mesh bin. Though easy to build more labor is required than for mound or wire mesh bins.

## Purchase a Bin

Manufactured bins provide a more contained environment for your compost pile. There is an assortment of bins available for purchase at home improvement stores, garden centers and on the internet. These bins typically advertise features to help make composting easier.

Bins are available for purchase at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rockland County. Call 845-429-7085 for more information.

**Materials:** Manufactured bins are typically made from a durable plastic.

**Advantages:** Easy to set-up; start composting immediately. Materials are completely contained.

**Disadvantages:** More expensive than other types of composting methods.