

Making Compost at Home It's Easier than You Think

by Elaine Silverstein

Making compost is the ultimate way to make something out of nothing. It's magic. Using weeds, kitchen refuse and fallen leaves—things you usually throw away—you make excellent quality, nutrient-rich soil for your plants.

Composting is a completely natural process. It's how nature recycles organic material. You don't need expensive composting systems, compost spinners, compost bins, compost forks, starter, aerating tools, and on and on. You already have everything you need.

What You Need

- a place for the compost piles
- brown material to provide carbon
- green material to provide nitrogen
- a leaf rake

Select an out-of-the way spot in your yard that gets some sunlight: for example, a spot next to a garage or shed that's never used. It can be as small as 6 feet by 6 feet square.

Brown material mostly means fallen leaves. In the autumn, save your leaves instead of raking them to the curb. Pile them up along one side of your yard so you'll have them all year. A good time to start to make compost, if you've never done it before, is the fall.

Green material is kitchen waste such as vegetable peelings, eggshells, and coffee grounds (but not meat or bones); and grass clippings and other yard waste.

You can make compost with just brown material: that pile of leaves will turn into excellent leaf mold within a year or two all on its own. You CANNOT make compost with just green material: piling up kitchen scraps without adding leaves will result in a smelly, slimy mess.

DO USE	DON'T USE
Brown material: fallen leaves	Animal products (skin, bones)
Green material: kitchen refuse	Dog or cat feces
	Weeds that have gone to seed
	Diseased plant material

The following tools are helpful but not absolutely necessary:

- a pitchfork
- a piece of 1/2" screening attached to a frame

What You Do

- Divide your 6' square in half so that you have two rectangles roughly 3' x 6'. Mark them with stakes, or by eye, or by outlining them with boards, snow fencing, or chicken wire. Those are your "bins."
- Begin building your first pile by spreading a layer (2-3") of leaves on one of the rectangles.
- Add green material as you accumulate it. When you have a thin layer (1-2") of green material, add another brown layer. You always want to have more brown than green material in the pile.
- When the pile is about 3' tall, add a final layer of leaves. Leave the pile to cook and begin a second pile on the other rectangle you laid out. From now on, you'll always have one pile building and another cooking.

Use a pitchfork to turn the compost once a week to mix up the pile. This will make the compost "cook" more quickly but it is not really necessary. Using this simple method, with or without turning, you will get two or three loads of compost a year.

Getting the Brown and Green Material

The only problem home composters face is accumulating enough brown material. The easiest way to solve this problem is to save your fallen leaves each year and use them throughout the year. Rake or blow the leaves into a long, thin, pile along one side of your backyard, or put them in an open shed.

Accumulating green material is easy. When you prepare food in your kitchen, keep a spare bowl handy into which you place the vegetable refuse—the stuff you usually throw away. When you're finished preparing the meal, or when the bowl gets full, or when you just feel like going outside, take the bowl and dump its contents on the working pile. Keep a closed one-quart plastic yogurt container on the kitchen counter at all times and take it out frequently.

Using the Finished Compost

The compost is done when the pile is uniformly dark in color, it smells like good, clean earth, and you can see very few identifiable objects in it. It's ready to be used, with or without screening, in your garden.

If you want to screen the compost, here's what you do:

- Place the screen over a container, put a shovelful of compost on it, and, wearing gloves, push the compost through the holes in the screen. Rich, dark, compost will fall through the screen into the container, and large objects—peach pits, corncobs, twigs—will remain.
- Toss the large pieces into the current working pile of compost. Eventually they too will break down.

- Use the finished compost to enrich the soil for your vegetables, flowers, or shrubs. There's no need to dig it in. Just place it on top of the soil, and the earthworms and other soil critters will do the mixing for you.

Resources

Compost At Home

The Environmental Protection Agency's guide to home composting.

<http://www2.epa.gov/recycle/composting-home>

Home Composting

A detailed guide from the Cornell Waste Management Institute

<http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/compostbrochure.pdf>

Home Composting Fact Sheet

A guide from the Rutgers Cooperative eXtension.

<https://www.ramapo.edu/ehs/files/2013/05/5-25.pdf>

Prepared by Elaine Silverstein, horticulturist, naturesurrounds@gmail.com