

# HOME GROUNDS FACT SHEET



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## The Big Heap — Facts About Compost

### COMPOST BENEFITS

The disposal of solid waste is a problem that can not be easily dealt with through municipal government action.

Each of us can play our individual part to reduce the volume of solid waste that we generate. Most kitchen and yard waste can be recycled naturally through the process of composting. Composting in the yard or at a local community garden requires much less energy and is less expensive than bagging, hauling and processing such waste through municipal landfills.

Yard waste — leaves, lawn clippings, etc. — makes up a large portion of the total refuse from a typical household and should be recycled.

Yard waste makes up about 20 percent of a community's residential waste. On the average, each household usually produces about 600 pounds of yard waste. In addition to being a major waste component, it usually is kept separate from other wastes from the home, and thus yard waste can easily be collected for composting.

The process of composting does not require expensive shredders, containers and other equipment.

Although certain hardware adds efficiency to the composting process, little investment is required. Chopping larger pieces of waste with a shovel or large knife will hasten the decomposition process. Leaves and stems can be broken into small pieces if processed through a rotary lawnmower. Low cost bins can be constructed from used fencing, lumber or cement block. A pitch fork will facilitate turning and digging the compost.

Compost is a valuable soil amendment for uses in garden and landscape plantings.

The use of compost improves plant growth by helping to break up and loosen clay soils by increasing water—holding capacity in sandy soils, and by adding nutrients to all soils.

If you are throwing away grass clippings, you are throwing away money.

Save time and money by letting short grass clippings fall back to the lawn rather than bagging and discarding them. Clippings break down rapidly and provide nitrogen. When clippings are long and heavy they should not be allowed to remain as clumps on the lawn. When gathered and added to the compost pile, clippings can provide the nitrogen needed to break down other more woody wastes.

**Caution:** Clippings from home lawns treated with pesticides may contain chemical residues. With few exceptions, these residues will not persist from one growing season to the next. When information regarding the use of pesticide is not available, turf clippings treated with pesticides should not be used in the compost pile.

### COMPOSTED MATERIALS

Practically any plant material can be composted.

Leaves are ideal, but pieces of sod, manure, lawn clippings, fine wood chips or sawdust, straw, hay and plant refuse from the garden or the kitchen can also be used. Shredding coarse materials like mature cornstalks and wood prunings into smaller-sized pieces will reduce the length of time needed for them to decompose. Even newspapers can be composted, provided they are finely shredded, mixed with other materials and supplied with nitrogen.

Some kitchen wastes and garbage should not be composted.

Although most food garbage can be composted, avoid grease, fat, bones, fish and meat scraps. These materials attract dogs and nuisance animals, and often develop an odor during decomposition. Fats are slow to break down and greatly increase the length of time required before compost can be used.

D-2-29 DWM-AAH reviewed RT 1/03

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## COMPOSTED MATERIALS - continued

Diseased vegetable and flower plants should not be composted.

Diseased plants from the garden should not be used for compost if the compost is to be returned to the garden. Most diseases are killed by heating during compost formation, but unless the compost is turned frequently and allowed to remain unused for several years, some of these disease organisms may be returned to the garden with the compost.

The composting process will occur all by itself without special microorganisms, hormones and activators added to the compost pile.

The microorganisms needed to break wastes into compost are present in great numbers in all garden soil. In fact, there usually are sufficient microorganisms floating in the air to start the decomposition process. A few handfuls of garden soil added to the compost pile will ensure inoculation of the pile with organisms, thus eliminating the need to purchase any sort of "compost starter."

Weeds heavily laden with seeds should not be composted.

Although most plants and their seeds are killed during composting, some can be returned alive to the garden with the compost, creating an unnecessary weed problem. Most weeds that have been pulled or cut before developing seed can be composted. Mature, vigorous growing perennial weeds such as quackgrass, bindweed and nutsedge should not be composted.

## MANAGEMENT AND USE

Moisture is necessary for the composting process to occur.

When starting a compost pile, it is best to spread refuse in layers about 6 to 8 inches deep. If no grass clippings are used, a cup or so of high-nitrogen fertilizer (10-10-10 cottonseed meal or dried blood) per 30-35 square feet will provide the nitrogen needed for the decay process. All materials in each layer must be thoroughly moistened. Repeat this pattern as materials are added to the pile through the season. Keeping the center of the pile lower than the sides will direct additional rainfall into the pile.

A loosely constructed bin or open enclosure facilitates oxygen flow for the production of good compost.

Building a compost pile is not an exact process. It begins with accumulating organization material in some out-of-the-way yet easy-to-get-to place. An enclosure made of wood, fencing or cement block will help keep the compost neatly stacked. Gardeners who have sufficient space can build a compost pile without walls. If a bin is used, walls should not be tight, because air is needed for decay.

Compost should not be used in a soil mix for starting flower and vegetable seedlings and transplants indoors.

Young seedlings and transplants are very susceptible to the disease microorganisms found in most soils and composts. To reduce the possibility of infection, it is best to use a commercially prepared sterilized soil or soilless mix when starting seedlings and transplants. It is very difficult to sterilize compost efficiently.

Burying organic waste directly in the garden is the simplest method of composting.

Yard wastes and kitchen scraps without meat, bones, or fatty foods will decompose when buried directly in the garden, but because of the absence of air, some nutrients will be lost. All materials must be firmly covered with soil. Rodents and dogs may dig up wastes buried less than 8 inches deep.

There are some limitations on the use of compost.

When some types of materials are added to a compost pile, certain precautions need to be taken. For example, dog or cat manure has the potential for carrying human parasites that can sometimes survive the decomposition process. Clippings from home lawns treated with pesticides may contain chemical residues. With few exceptions, these residues will not persist from one growing season to the next. When information regarding the residue of the pesticide is not available, materials treated with the pesticide should not be added to the compost pile.

*Reference: Cornell University Bulletin*