

Getting Started with Composting

by

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Compost is a wonderful thing. Recycled from organic matter, it is rich in nutrients and great for use as a fertilizer and soil amendment. Here is a simple plan for passive composting that will provide you with enough compost to make you want to have more, and allow you to do your part for producing less for the landfill. I'll talk about the smallest method, because I want you to get started ASAP. This easily converts to a larger scale, when you are ready to upgrade to a stand-alone bin or tumbler.

You will need the following:

The Equipment:

A heavy-duty plastic trashcan with a tightly-fitting lid; bags or bins for storage of finished compost.

The Materials:

A mix of "brown" (Carbon – shredded leaves, shredded newspaper or junk mail) and "green" (Nitrogen – grass clippings, non-woody plant trimmings, kitchen scraps) vegetative matter

How to:

In your heavy-duty trashcan, layer in the materials – start with a little soil on the bottom (from your houseplants, yard or garden, or a bag of topsoil), then alternate layers of "brown" and "green" matter. You will want more "brown" than "green" – about 3 to 1. Fill no more than $\frac{3}{4}$ full to start. If the materials are very dry, add some water to moisten it. It should hold together, but not clump up or drip. Then, secure the lid and roll the can around on its side to mix up the ingredients. Stand it back up and leave it alone for three weeks. At that time, open the lid and check to see how it's doing. It should have reduced in volume by about $\frac{1}{3}$ or more. Now you can start adding in materials as they accumulate. Rolling the can around after each addition will speed up the process ("active" composting), or just leave it alone to do its own thing ("passive" composting). It doesn't need to be fully decomposed to use as a soil amendment, but you shouldn't be able to tell everything apart like you could when you first added it. Remove it from the can and use it immediately, or store in another heavy bag or bin and start a new batch!

Tips to remember:

The smaller the pieces, the faster the decomposition!

Save your kitchen scraps in a bag in the freezer – add to your can when the bag gets full!

Make sure that lid is on tight. Otherwise, dogs, cats, squirrels raccoons and others may think it is a special feast you are cooking up just for them!

Other ways to use passive composting (you don't need any equipment for these – just the materials!)

Don't bag your leaves – use them as mulch on your garden beds over the winter.

Leave grass trimmings on the lawn.

For free advice on your gardening problems, contact Fairfax County Master Gardeners:

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