

HOW TO COMPOST

A Public Service of the
CHURCHILL AREA ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL
2300 Wm. Penn Highway, Pittsburgh, PA 15235 1991

Composting is a natural way of returning organic matter to the soil from which it came. Compost contains some valuable mineral nutrients, but mostly it improves the "tilth" of the soil, making it light and fluffy, while conserving moisture and admitting air. The use of compost in your garden will benefit all plants. A compost pile is NOT a garbage dump. Build it properly.

1) **LOCATE THE PILE.** Select a shady, level area. A four foot cube pile will yield enough compost for a whole season of gardening.

2) **BUILD IT.** You can simply toss your plant materials into a big heap, but to make the mound neater and to screen it from neighbors, you could build a 3-sided frame. Most anything - fencing or masonry blocks - will do. The open, fourth side is an access area for turning the pile and for removing the finished compost.

Cut a few thick stakes or branches into 5 foot lengths and stick them into the ground vertically within the composting enclosure. They will be removed once the pile is built to form chimney-like vents that draw air through the pile.

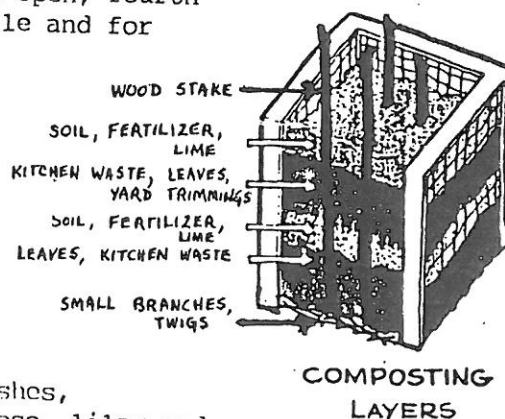
3) **FEED IT.** Start the pile with a grid of small branches and twigs for drainage. Next add your yard and kitchen wastes - grass and shrub clippings, leaves, wood ashes, fallen fruit, spent plants (avoid iris, rose, lilac and peony which often carry diseases or parasites,) egg and peanut shells, fruit and vegetable parings, coffee grounds, etc. It is a bad idea to compost meat, bones or pet wastes since these emit odors that attract flies and scavengers. Do not add large volumes of grass clippings at one time because they tend to mat down into a wet, slimy mass. Mix them with dry leaves or twigs for proper aeration, the best insurance against odors.

NOTE: If you have a shredder/grinder you can reduce the size of the materials to be composted and speed their decomposition.

4) **KEEP IT GOING.** Keep the pile moist, but not wet. To every foot of the pile add an inch or two of agricultural lime, soil and fertilizer (well rotted manure or ordinary lawn food will do nicely.) These steps are not essential, but will speed the composting process by keeping the nutrients and pH at optimum levels for the bacteria and fungi that do the decomposing.

When the pile is 4 feet high remove the wooden stakes to leave ventilation holes. Then make a circular depression in the center of the mound to catch rain water. "Nature" will take over and decay should result in temperatures of about 160°F. in the center of the pile. This heat will kill weed seeds, insects and disease organisms.

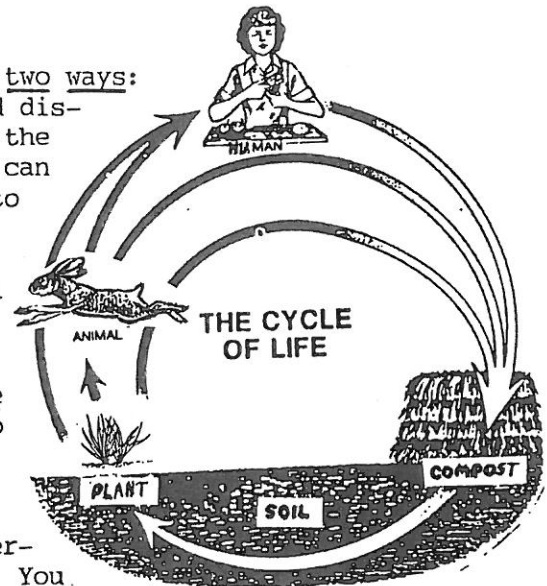
5) **TURN IT.** If desired, use a pitchfork or spade to turn and mix the pile every 4 - 6 weeks (except during cold winter months.) This will maintain aerobic conditions, eliminating possible odors. Also, the more often the mound is turned, the faster it will decompose. The pile should be "finished" in 3 months to 1 year, and you will "harvest" a rich, dark, crumbly product called humus. Use it immediately or as needed.



6) **DIG IT IN.** Finished compost (humus) can be used in two ways: as a mulch on top of the soil to retain moisture and discourage weeds or as a soil conditioner, worked into the top few inches of the garden to improve tilth. You can also apply a thin layer of fine (screened) compost to the lawn as often as you mow. The best idea is to throw away your grass catcher, mow frequently, and leave the grass clippings where they fall; they will not cause thatch.

7) **SPECIAL STEP.** Large branches and twigs can also be recycled, but will take longer. Build a second pile for them, selecting and enclosing an area as in Step 1). Align the sticks so they pack closely. If you have any leaves, clippings or fertilizer left over from the regular compost mound, add them too. Then keep the pile moist. In a few weeks the bottom materials will begin to decay and the pile will settle. You can place additional materials on top as they become available. Within one to three years you will have another good supply of compost.

8) **FOR THE LAZY COMPOSTER** with a sizable yard. Make several compost heaps, one each year for 3 years. Pile up garden and kitchen wastes (no animal parts) in one 4 foot heap, moisten regularly, and otherwise forget it. Repeat with a new pile the next year and start a third pile in the succeeding year. By this time the first pile will be "finished" and the product can be used. Thus, with no turning or special treatment of the pile (just increased time to complete the decomposition) you will always have a pile being built, another one "resting" and a third yielding finished compost— all at no cost to you.



FOOD WEB OF THE COMPOST PILE

