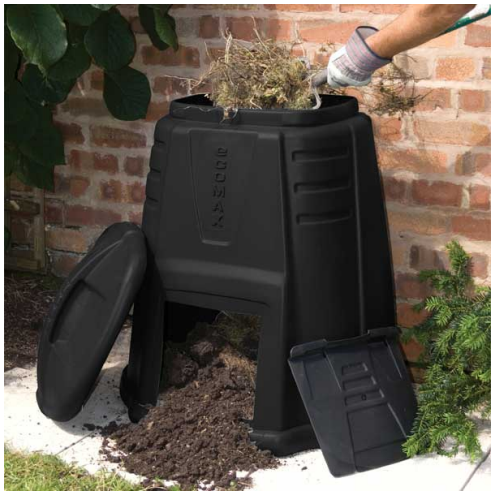
COMPOST: How to Make & Use

Protect our waters using compost! There's no need for chemical fertilizers for gardens or lawn.



Compost is the best addition to your garden and lawn to introduce nutrients and beneficial microorganisms which help enrich the soil. Compost is a master gardener's "black gold", the secret to thriving gardens and can even replace chemical fertilizers. Healthy soil supports healthy plants that also resist pests.

What is compost? Compost is decomposed kitchen and yard waste, "organic matter", that becomes a soil addition rich in nutrients and microbes for plants, trees and lawns. It can be used to enrich your garden soil, as mulch to keep in moisture and to top dress lawns. Compost is also the key ingredient in organic farming.

Why compost? Save money by making your own natural garden fertilizer that creates healthy gardens and lawns without polluting the ground and waterways. Composting is a great way to get rid of yard and kitchen waste to reduce waste in landfills. Compost also eliminates the need for expensive weed and feed lawn services.

Composting is nature's way of recycling!

What's compost made of? Plant material from your kitchen and yard. Items you add are identified as either Green or Brown material. Compost should contain about 2 parts brown carbon-rich material to 1 part green nitrogen-rich material.

DO NOT COMPOST: Oils, meats, bones, dairy products or pet or human waste.

GREEN MATERIAL: 1 Part Nitrogen-rich Material

Coffee grounds, tea with bags, crushed eggshells, kitchen waste (veggies, fruits and greens including seeds, peelings and rinds), dead houseplants (not woody, thorns or diseased), chemical-free green grass clippings, green garden debris (spent annuals, deadheading waste material), weeds (but not with set seeds like thistle), algae and chicken, duck, horse or cow manure. If you add manure, make sure the source uses organic feed and it is aged. Make sure the compost reaches a temperature of 140 degrees to kill pathogens.

BROWN MATERIAL: 2 Parts Carbon Rich

Grass clippings (brown and dead, no chemicals), leaves (make a pile in fall so you have some for summer), straw (not hay which contains weed and grass seeds), sawdust and wood chips (not from treated lumber), dried plant stalks and vines, wood ash (limited amount and not charcoal) and pine needles (add only small amount as they decompose slowly).

Fast Compost - Keep the ratio of brown to green mentioned above and add a few layers of soil as you add ingredients. Keep the pieces small and the pile moist as a damp sponge - you can even add freshwater aquarium water. Turn the pile every week or so your compost will be ready sooner in about 4 months. These compost piles should generate heat between 140 and 165 degrees.

Slow and Lazy Compost: Follow directions for content above and let it go. Nature will slowly do its thing.

COMPOST USE: GARDENS & LAWNS

You can buy bags of finished compost or use compost you've made yourself.

Important note: Use finished compost that is dark, has an earthy smell and is completely broken down. Using "unfinished" compost that contains food scraps can attract pests and can cause harm to young plants. Do a bag test to ensure your compost is finished: Put a handful of moist compost into a zip-lock bag and press out the air before sealing. After three days if you detect an ammonia or sour odor, the microorganisms are still at work, and you need to let your compost finish curing.

COMPOST IN THE HOME GARDEN:

Adding compost to your garden helps improve the structure and overall health of your soil to retain moisture, break down clay and increase earthworms and microbes.

Flowering Gardens: You can add compost any time of year. In spring or fall, loosen the top few inches of annual and perennial beds and mix in a 1-inch layer of compost. In summer you can add compost around the base plants to act as a mulch that will retain moisture, add more nutrients and prevents weeds. You can also add a layer of compost over the top of plants (the crown) after the 1st freeze to protect roots over the winter.

Planting or Transplanting Annuals and Perennials: Add about 1/3 compost to the mix of soil when you plant or transplant to support healthy roots.

Vegetable Gardens: For new soil in raised beds you can plant vegetables and herbs in up to 50% compost mix. On existing gardens, each fall spread several inches of compost on top of the bed and mix it into the soil in the springtime. In spring when you plant new plants place a handful of compost in each hole. Once plants begin to grow you can add a half-inch layer of compost, grass clippings or straw around the base of the plants as a mulch to keep soil moist. Provide heavy producing fruit or veggie plants with an extra 1/2 inch of compost monthly—this will result in great produce!

Planters and Window Boxes: Potting soil gets depleted of its nutrients as plants grow. If you don't have fresh soil, mix in ¼ compost to replenish nutrients and retain moisture, add an inch of compost to potted plants and window boxes twice a year. You can even add a layer of compost to your indoor plants.

COMPOST IN LAWNS:

Top Dressing: Adding compost encourages lush green lawns by reducing compaction and thatch, improving soil structure, adding nutrients, and acting as a long-term fertilizer. Top dress existing turf with as much as 1/2 inch fine rather than chunky compost. This is easiest with a spreader, but you can also use a shovel. Rake the compost evenly throughout the grass area to enable the compost to sift into the soil.

Bald Spots: Treat bald spots by raking in an inch of compost into the soil, and then reseeding.

New lawn: When establishing new turf, add up to 3 inches of compost into the existing soil and then rake into the soil before seeding. Otherwise, seed directly over the compost. Over time, compost will decrease compaction and create a healthy lawn which will reduce the need for expensive and hazardous synthetic fertilizers and pesticides.

COMPOST FOR SHRUB AND TREE PLANTING:

New shrub or tree: Add up to 1/4 of the soil mix from the hole as compost when planting to help establish the roots. Make the hole the same depth as the plant but twice as wide.

Current shrub or trees: Work ½ – 1 inch of compost into the top 2 inches of soil from the trunk to the dripline—the outermost parameter of the tree's canopy. The compost will act as a substitute layer of organic matter that naturally exists on the forest floor - it provides nutrients, reduces moisture loss, and keeps the soil cool. Before adding compost to compacted soils, gently cultivate the soil with a hand tool which will prevent damage to shallow feeder roots while making nutrients more readily accessible to the trees or shrub. Do not place compost or mulch directly against the bark of the tree or shrub as this could cause rot, disease and invite pests. If you have exposed tree roots add a 2-3" layer of mulch - do not add compost or soil to cover exposed tree roots.