Composting: The Basics

Compiled by **The Compostadores:**
Keepin' the nutrients in the neighborhood!

Compost is a highly nutritious soil made up of decomposed organic matter. It is a very important part of the growth cycle – it builds healthy soil naturally in the garden.

How is compost used? Compost improves the quality of soil in vegetable gardens, flower gardens, trees and houseplants alike. It is created naturally in the forests and in nature – fallen leaves and trees decompose to return nutrients to their environments. Similarly, kitchen scraps including fruits and vegetables can be composted to bring nutrition to the garden. Mixed with leaves and backyard cuttings, compost will produce a nourishing blend to build fertility in the soil, producing healthy plants.

Composting prevents waste and pollution

About ¼ of our waste is composed of food scraps and paper products that can be composted. By composting, households can prevent a great deal of waste from being hauled to landfills. When kitchen scraps decompose in landfills, they produce methane, an extremely potent greenhouse gas. However, in compost piles, kitchen scraps decompose aerobically, and do not produce greenhouse gasses.

Compost bolsters soil nutrients when added to the garden, helping to prevent use of artificial fertilizers and protecting against soil loss. It helps keep nutrients from your food scraps in your neighborhood – not in the dump.

What can be composted in a backyard pile?

Virtually all fruit and vegetable leftovers compost very nicely in a backyard pile, as well as most other food scraps.

Egg shells, coffee filters and tea bags also break down well

Most backyard waste can be composted – leaves, small branches, grass clippings, foliage, etc. The smaller the material, the faster it will turn into rich, productive soil.

What should NOT be composted in the backyard?

Meat, fish (a potential health hazard)

Dairy such as milk, cheese, butter – these tend to smell very bad and attract unwanted animals

Cooking oil and very greasy foods

Diseased plants or invasive weeds

Pet and human feces

Browns and Greens: There are different types of materials that go into a compost pile. "Browns" are high in *carbon* and serve as the fiber for the compost, which are things like dead leaves, sawdust, hay, dead plants, and brown paper bags. "Greens" are high in *nitrogen* and help the compost heat up and break down, including live branches, fruits and vegetable scraps. In order to ensure that your compost pile breaks down at an efficient rate, try to maintain a ratio between 2 and 3 times more browns than greens.

Static Piles

These are compost piles that don't need to be turned – they simply sit and turn into soil on their own. While turning your compost pile makes the compost materials turn into rich soil more quickly, a static pile requires very little maintenance and is desirable in a number of situations. For a static pile, you will want to create layers of greens and browns, each about 4 inches deep.

There are two additions that are especially important in static bins. First, be sure to place a layer of straw at the bottom of the bin, to allow for proper aeration. Second, as part of your browns, incorporate wood chips in the bin, to release mycelia which help break down the contents of the bin more quickly.

Trouble Shooting Guide

Composting is easy, but sometimes things need to be modified to maximize efficiency

Symptoms	Cause	Solution
The compost has a bad odor.	Not enough air; pile too wet.	Turn it; add coarse, dry materials such as straw, corn stalks.
The center of the pile is dry.	Not enough water; too much woody, coarse material.	Turn and moisten materials; add fresh green wastes, chop or shred coarse wastes.
The compost is damp and warm in the middle, but nowhere else.	Pile is too small.	Collect more material and mix the old ingredients into a new pile
The heap is damp and sweet smelling but still will not heat up.	Lack of nitrogen	Mix in a nitrogen source such as fresh grass clippings, bloodmeal.

From The American Community Gardening Association, 1991

MORE Resources with great additional information:

American Community Gardening Association:
http://communitygarden.org/docs/learn/articles/how_to_compost.pdf

Eureka Recycling: http://www.makedirtnotwaste.org/pdf/backyardcomposting2010.pdf

Martin, Debra. The Rodale Book of Composting: Easy Methods for Every Gardener.

University of Illinois extension: http://urbanext.illinois.edu/compost/process.cfm

University of MN – ag. extension: http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/horticulture/DG3296.html