



Master Gardener of Ventura County Helpline
805.645.1455 mgventura@ucdavis.edu

Backyard Composting

How to Recycle Fruit, Vegetables and Yard Trimmings
into a Black Gold Soil Amendment for Your Garden

Why Compost?

- Composting is nature's way of turning fruit, vegetable and yard trimmings into dark, crumbly sweet-smelling soil conditioner
- Composting benefits the environment by recycling organic resource and extending the life of landfills
- Composting can save money by lowering refuse bills and replacing store-bought soil conditioners
- Compost improves the water-holding capacity of soil
- Compost keeps soil from compacting so it's easier to work and develop root systems
- Compost gives sandy soil needed texture

Choose a System

Bins, Drums, Open Piles

- Systems can be manufactured, purchased or easily made using concrete blocks, garbage cans, wood pallets or scrap wood
- Optimal bin size: 3'x3'x3' or 5'x5'x5'

Begin Composting

1. Chop: materials will break down faster
2. Mix: brown with green materials
3. Maintain: air and water balance by keeping compost as moist as a wrung-out sponge

Compost Happens

Microorganisms (bacteria, fungi) and macroorganisms (worms, insects and their relatives) break down the contents of a compost pile. Supplying the organisms with food, water and air speeds up the compost process.

What to Compost

Browns (Carbon)

- Dry leaves
- Eggshells
- Straw
- Coffee Filters
- Hair, lint
- Wood shavings
- Pine needles
- Shredded newspaper
- Chopped Woody prunings

Greens (Nitrogen)

- Grass Clippings
- Herbivore manures
- Flowers
- Sawdust
- Coffee grounds
- Green leaves
- Young weeds
- Tea leaves and bags
- Sod

Don't Compost

- Meat, bones, fish
- Dairy or grease
- Dog, cat or bird feces
- Treated wood sawdust
- Invasive weeds or plants (Bermuda grass, ivy, oxalis)
- Diseased plants

Rapid Compost Technique

- Build a 3'x3'x3' pile with equal amounts of browns and greens.
- Chop materials to increase surface area for microorganisms to decompose the browns and greens.
- Turn the pile every 3 days at first, then weekly. Add water as needed to keep as moist as a wrung-out sponge.
- Start saving ingredients for the next pile.
- Finished compost looks like rich, brown soil. The original ingredients cannot be identified.
- Compost should be finished in 6 to 8 weeks.
- Screen compost through a ½-1" screen over a wheelbarrow; throw larger pieces back into the pile for additional composting.

Slow Compost Technique

- Add chopped and unchopped yard materials as they are generated. Keep materials as moist as a wrung-out sponge
- Turn as desired.
- Harvest composted matter from the bottom of the pile in 12 to 18 months.

Mixed Compost Technique

- Mix fruit, vegetable, and yard trimmings. Be sure to add both browns and greens. If necessary add water until slightly damp.
- Feed yard trimmings to your pile as you generate them. First chop them into pieces 6" or smaller.
- Bury food scraps 6-12" deep in the heart of the pile. Never dump and run. Feed pile as often as you like.
- Turn compost with a pitch fork or mix it about once a week. Keep it as moist as a wrung-out sponge.
- Harvest rich, brown, finished compost after 3 to 8 months. Sift out coarse, unfinished materials and return them to the pile.

Always wear gloves when handling compost

Trouble Shooting

Symptom	Problem	Solution
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pile not composting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Too wet/too dry• Too much brown	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Add water only until slightly damp, turn if too wet• Add fresh matter or organic nitrogen fertilizer, turn
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pile smells rotten	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Too wet/ too many food scraps or lawn clipping	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Turn and add browns
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attracts flies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Food scraps exposed• Non-compostables	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bury and mix food scraps 6-12" into heart of pile• Remove meat, dairy, grease, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rodents in pile	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Food scraps exposed• Bin holes larger than 1/2"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use trap or bait, rodent-proof bin, remove meat, grease, etc. , bury food, turn pile

Sources:

UCCE Placer/Nevada County
UCCE Sacramento County
Regional Recycling Pamphlet

The University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) prohibits discrimination against or harassment of any person participating in any of ANR's programs or activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity, pregnancy (which include pregnancy, childbirth and medical conditions related to pregnancy or childbirth), physical or mental disability, medical condition (cancer-related or genetic characteristics), genetic information (including family medical history), ancestry, marital status, age, sexual orientation, citizenship, or service in the uniformed services (as defined by the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994: service in the uniformed services includes membership, application for membership, performance of service, application for service, or obligation for service in the uniformed services). Inquiries regarding the University's equal employment opportunity policies may be directed to Linda Marie Manton, Affirmative Action Contact, University of California, Davis, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2801 Second Street, Davis, CA 95618 (530)752-0495.