



---

# ASK A MASTER GARDENER

---

## USING COFFEE GROUNDS IN THE GARDEN

*By Trish Grenfell, Placer County Master Gardener*

**Q** I thought coffee grounds were too acidic to use as a mulch or to add to a compost pile. Now I see that Starbucks is offering customers complimentary spent coffee grounds for their garden. I am confused. Help!

**A** Coffee grounds are a great addition to the garden and the compost pile. Despite common beliefs, spent coffee grounds are not acidic. The acid in coffee is water-soluble—so the acid is in the coffee you drink, not the leftover grounds. There are a few potential issues if you spread it in your garden however. If left to dry out, coffee grounds can repel water in much the same way as peat moss that becomes dry. And Washington State Master Gardeners found that fruit flies were attracted to wet coffee grounds.

**Solution:** Spread grounds on the soil and cover with leaves or compost or bark mulch. Or better yet, cultivate them directly into the soil. However when applying coffee grounds (or any uncomposted organic matter) directly to your garden soil, remember to add some nitrogen fertilizer also to the soil. Nitrogen-eating microbes used in the decomposition of the grounds will grow in the soil, stealing available nitrogen from your plants. After the grounds have decomposed, your soil tilth and structure are improved.

Composting is an excellent and arguably the easiest method to recycle the coffee grounds. These grounds add the nitrogen necessary to turn organic matter into compost which means that coffee grounds are classified as a “green” in the green/brown compost recipes. The Environmental Protection Agency suggests adding no more than 25 percent volume coffee grounds. This relates to the compost general rule that diversity in the pile represents goodness. Please note that coffee grounds are special. OSU Extension’s Compost Specialist Program reported that coffee grounds helped sustain high temperatures in compost piles for two weeks, thus reducing the presence of potentially dangerous pathogens as well as weed seeds in the pile. In contrast, the manure in their trials didn’t sustain the heat as long. This means that coffee grounds are an excellent and safe substitute for nitrogen-rich manure.

An added benefit is that earthworms are attracted to the grounds in the compost pile as well as worm bins. Worm composters report that coffee grounds are an excellent food source for the little critters.

---

### UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION



#### PLACER COUNTY

11477 E Avenue  
Auburn, CA 95603  
**(530) 889-7385**

*E-Mail:* [ceplacer@ucdavis.edu](mailto:ceplacer@ucdavis.edu)

The University of California, in accordance with applicable Federal and State law and University policy, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, medical condition (cancer-related), ancestry, marital status, citizenship, sexual orientation, or status as a Vietnam-era veteran or special disabled veteran. Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to the Affirmative Action Director, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1111 Franklin, 6th Floor, Oakland, California 94607-5200. (510) 987-0096. United States Department of Agriculture, University of California, Placer & Nevada Counties cooperating.

#### NEVADA COUNTY

255 So Auburn  
Grass Valley, CA 95945  
**(530) 273-4563**

*E-Mail:* [cenevada@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cenevada@ucdavis.edu)