

Composting – Try It At Home

Composting is easy and inexpensive and will help your garden grow healthy and strong. Use compost to provide nutrients, to reduce your need for fertilizer and to improve the soil quality. It can also be used as mulch to control weeds and save water.

What is compost?

Compost is a dark crumbly mixture of nutrient rich decomposed organic matter – such as grass clippings, leaves, twigs and branches. Uses for compost:

- As a soil amendment. Mix two to five inches of compost into vegetable and flower gardens each year before planting.
- As a potting mixture. Add one part compost to two parts commercial potting soil, or make your own mixture by using equal parts of compost and sand or perlite.
- As a mulch. Spread an inch or two of compost around annual flowers and vegetables, and up to six inches around trees and shrubs.
- Top-dressing for lawns. Top-dressing turf areas with compost is recommended to provide a slow release of nitrogen. Mix finely sifted compost with sand and sprinkle evenly over lawn. Using compost will improve the condition of your soil and allow for better water retention, which will allow you water less.

How does composting work?

Composting is done by a wide variety of organisms found naturally in organic matter. They work together, feeding on your pile to break materials down.

Composting can be practiced in most backyards in a homemade or manufactured composting bin. Homemade bins can be constructed out of scrap wood, chicken wire, snow fencing or even old garbage cans (with holes punched in the sides and bottom). Manufactured bins include turning units, hoops, cones, and stacking bins. These can be purchased from retail or mail-order businesses. Take the time to consider your options and then select a bin that best fits your needs.

Recipe for success

Your compost pile is a teeming community of microorganisms that processes leaves and yard debris to produce compost. For best results, mix two parts carbon-rich (“brown”) materials, such as brown leaves, to one part nitrogen-rich materials (“green”), such as grass clippings, as you build your pile. A pile with these proportions of carbon to nitrogen will promote large populations of microorganisms and produce compost quickly.

YES! Do compost:

Green (one part): fresh grass clippings, green leaves, plant stalks, hedge trimmings, annual weeds without seed heads and vegetable and fruit scraps

Brown (two parts): old potting soil, twigs, dried grass and leaves, shredded newspaper, straw and wood chips

NO! Don't compost: diseased plants, weeds with seed heads or invasive weeds or pet wastes

Chopping your yard debris before adding it to your compost pile will greatly reduce the amount of time it takes to turn the materials into useable compost.

For more information

The Evanston Ecology Center occasionally offers how-to classes on composting, visit <http://www.cityofevanston.org/departments/parks/centers/ecology.shtml> or call 847-448-8256 for a current class schedule.