

MAKING THE MOST OF COMPOST

Compost is the heart and soul of organic gardening. You don't have to be a farmer or an earth worm to reap the benefits of composting.

You can compost your own garden and kitchen waste at home with very little effort. Compost is often thought of as a magical ingredient added to cure all of your soil's problems. Believe it or not that is close to the truth. Adding organic matter to your garden will improve the structure, water holding capacity, and aeration of soils containing too much clay, as well as those with too much sand. Compost is the most often recommended source of organic material. It is easy to make, easy to use, and contains a storehouse of nutrients. Let's consider how much work is *really* involved, equipment required, and when compost is ready.



Composting can be as much or as little work as you want to make it. The more effort you put into it, the faster you will have finished compost. Building a "hot pile" takes more effort and decomposes faster than a "cold pile." A "hot pile" is built with ideal size, moisture, air, and plant materials. It will reach over 140 degrees at its center and attract the most beneficial bacteria. Most of us simply build a "cold pile" because it really only amounts to making a pile of stuff and letting it rot naturally. It does take longer and occasionally you have to turn it over to avoid unpleasant smells.

The only *required* equipment is a shovel or pitchfork to turn or move the contents of the pile. Optional equipment includes compost bins, water hose, an axe or other chopping tool, garden gloves, and a wheelbarrow. If you are *really* serious, you may purchase an aeration tool, thermometer, and a compost sifter (but then you may not have time to garden!).

Your pile can be built anywhere except up against a structure such as a shed or a solid fence. There will be bugs and worms helping you compost and you want them in the pile, not in the shed or the house. Two feet is a safe distance from any structure. A bin is unnecessary. You can just build your pile on the ground. We need a variety of plant material to start off with. Grass clippings, kitchen scraps and manure provide nitrogen while leaves and dried straw provide carbon. Be sure to chop up the dry carbon material with your axe or shred with your hands into one to two inch pieces. You simply throw in organic materials as they become available. This will result in a very slow "cold pile," but it may be appropriate if you are not in *need* of finished compost.

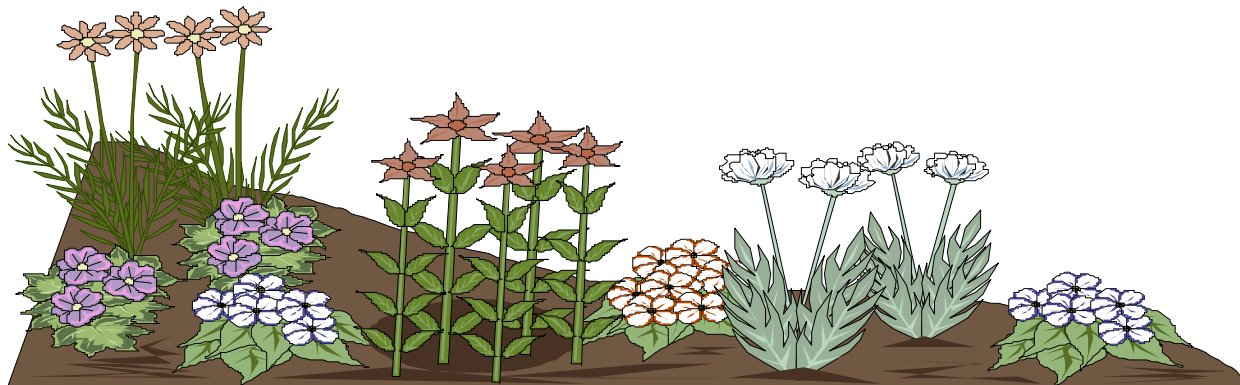
If you want a faster "hot pile," there are some steps you can take to help heat things up. Wet the ground under the pile. Put coarse twigs or straw at the bottom to improve air circulation. Layer the rest of your materials, alternating nitrogen (green plants and kitchen scraps) and carbon (dry plant material), add water as you go. End with a carbon layer so it will act as insulation. If you do this, you will not need to cover the pile. In a few days check to see that your pile becomes hot. To do this, turn the material, it will be warm to the touch and may even be steaming. The material should also be damp, like a wrung out sponge - add water if needed. Turning the pile is optional, but it allows the material to be exposed to the hot center and increases air circulation. We suggest you turn yours every other week.

The finished compost pile will have shrunk! It only takes up about a quarter of the space of the original pile. When the individual materials can no longer be identified and the pile looks like dark, rich soil, the compost is completed. It will smell sweet, woody, and earthy. It will crumble through your fingers. You may find that the bottom of the pile is ready first. It is not too difficult to scoop out some of the completed compost from the bottom with a shovel.

Keep a large coffee can under your kitchen sink for kitchen scraps, it can sit a few days before any odor starts to waft into

the kitchen. Coffee grounds have a pleasant smell that hides most other odors - keep them in the paper filter, it will break down too! Some things to avoid are diseased vines from tomatoes and squashes as they may contaminate the pile if it isn't hot enough. Do not use animal fats such as meat scraps, grease, or bones as they might attract unwelcome critters! You can use eggshells, bone meal, dried blood, and even hair if you wish, these provide beneficial minerals and may help discourage garden pests.

Use your homemade compost as a side dressing for your garden rows. The nutrients will fertilize your crops organically.



For More Information on Capital District Community Gardens' programs or to make a tax-deductible donation contact:



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