

BACKYARD COMPOSTING

*A Guide to Composting
Yard and Food Waste*



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A Guide to Composting Yard and Food Waste

This reference guide is designed for the novice gardener. The reference guide will explain how composting works, and also show you how to use compost at home.

Everything you need to know to start composting is outlined, including a step by step guide to successful composting, what to do if the compost pile is not working properly, and how to use the compost in the garden, after the process is completed.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you want more information on home composting and yard waste management strategies, contact:

Erie County Recycling Program
Erie County Court House, Room 119
140 West 6th Street
Erie, PA 16501
(814) 451-6019
www.recyclethis.org

Graphics and subject information was provided by Cornell University booklet *Waste to Resources.*

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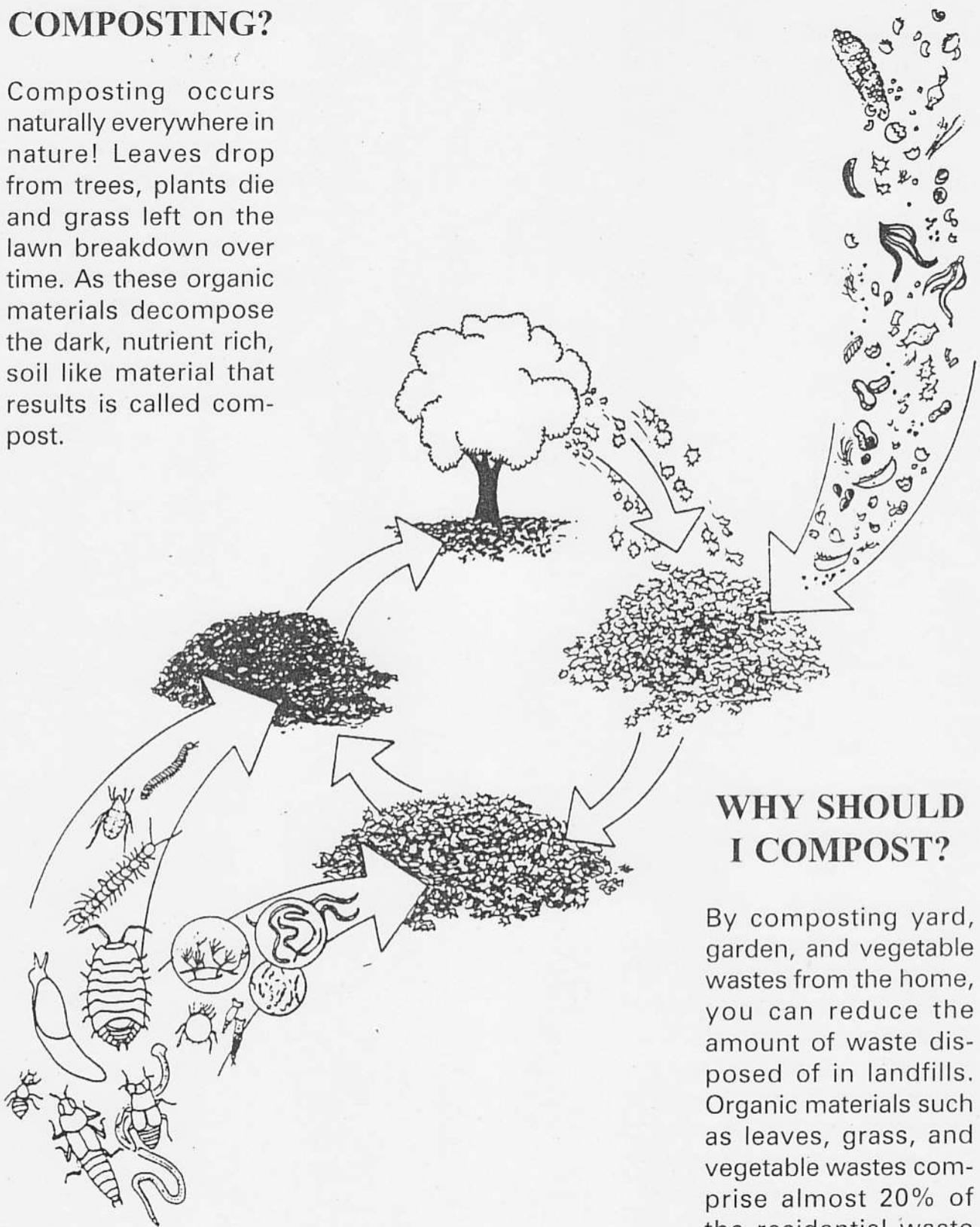


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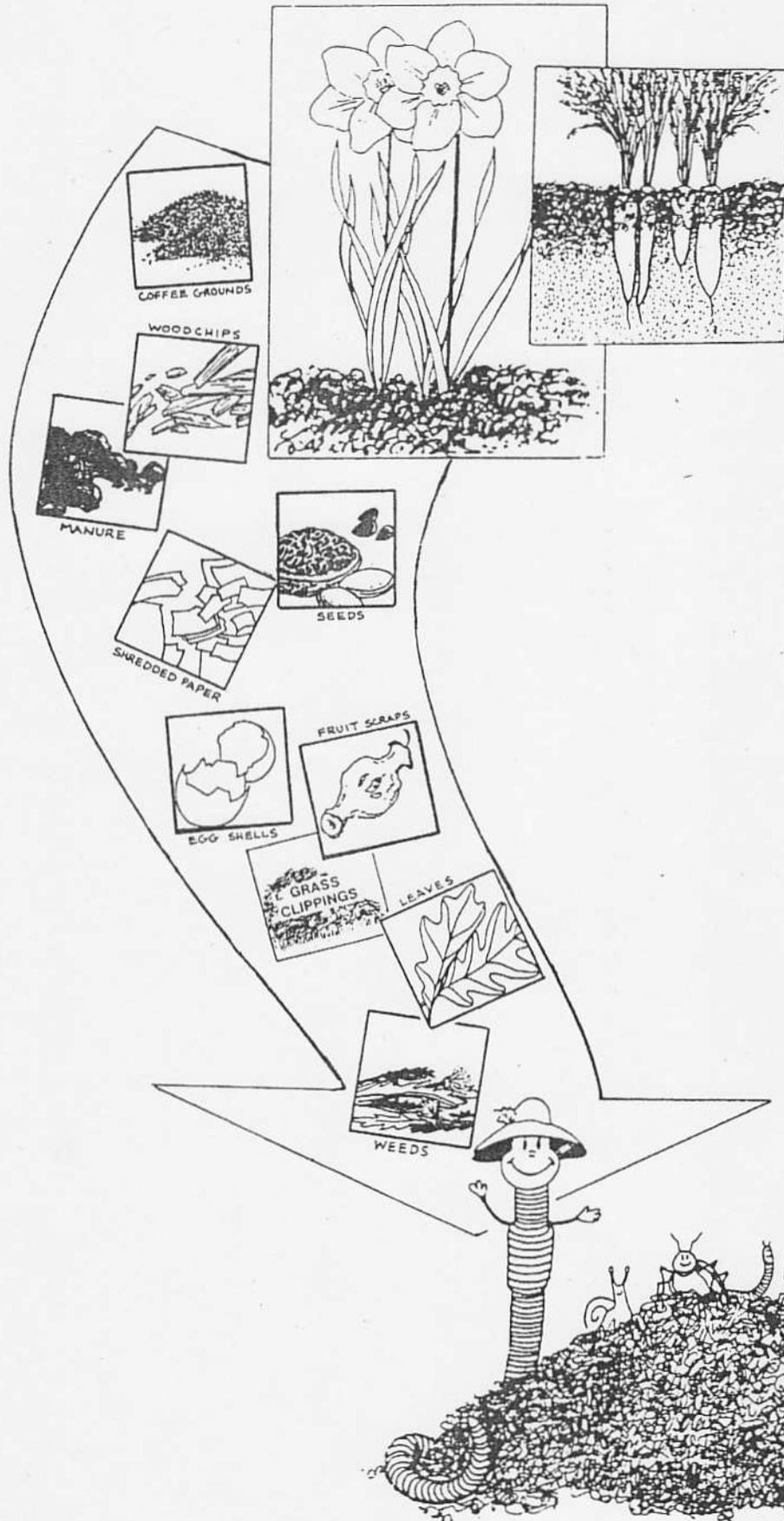
WHAT IS COMPOSTING?

Composting occurs naturally everywhere in nature! Leaves drop from trees, plants die and grass left on the lawn breakdown over time. As these organic materials decompose the dark, nutrient rich, soil like material that results is called compost.



WHY SHOULD I COMPOST?

By composting yard, garden, and vegetable wastes from the home, you can reduce the amount of waste disposed of in landfills. Organic materials such as leaves, grass, and vegetable wastes comprise almost 20% of the residential waste stream - **that's 330 pounds per person per year!**



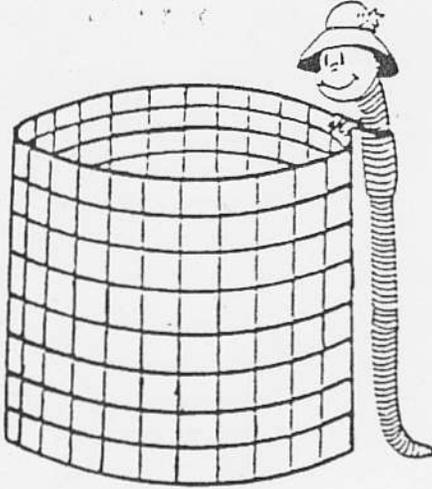
Composting creates a valuable soil amendment. Nutrients are returned to the soil and used by trees, grass and other plants to help them grow.

Composting has long been used by gardeners as a valuable soil additive for lawns, houseplants, and gardens. Compost allows the soil to hold more water and keeps plants healthy.

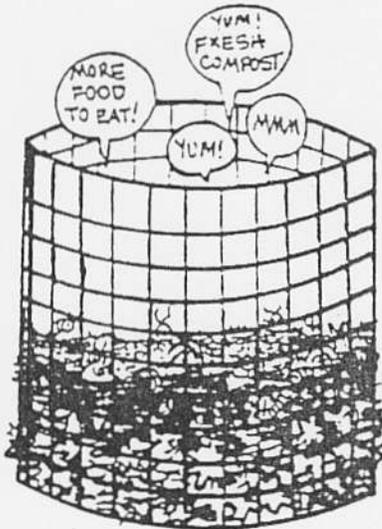
Your kitchen and yard waste serve as food for worms, soil animals and microorganisms. The living organisms help break down organic material such as wood waste, newspaper, vegetable scraps, sawdust, leaves, grass, and straw into compost.

Composting is nature's way of recycling.

10 EASY STEPS TO COMPOSTING

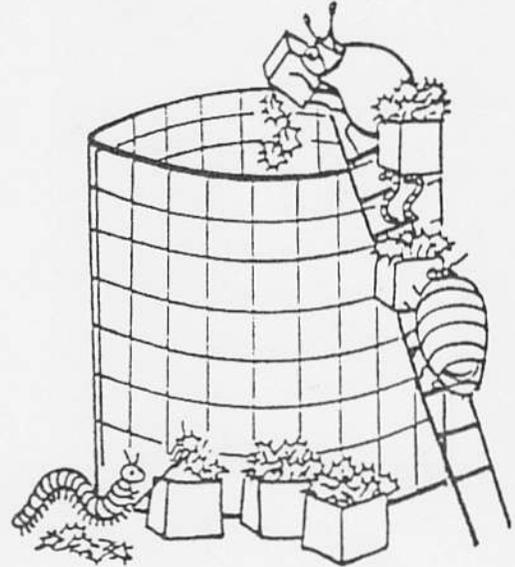


- 1) Select a location for your bin, keeping in mind that during the summer a shady spot will help keep the pile moist. In the winter use a sunny location to keep compost warm. It is *not necessary* to move the bin, however moving it seasonally will optimize the decomposition process.

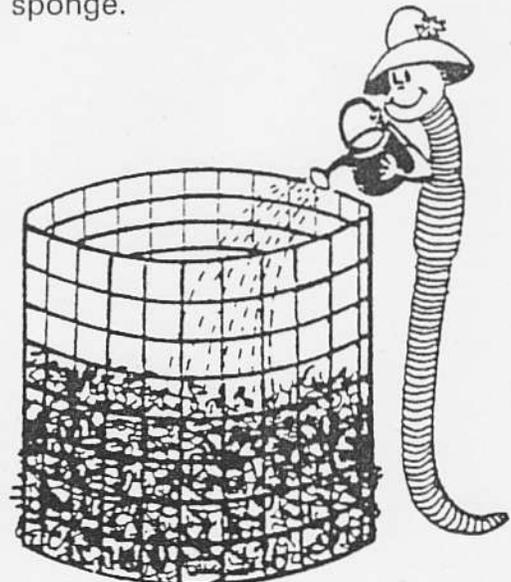


- 3) To start your pile "cooking", add some soil to the mix. This adds microbes to the pile which are needed for decomposition. Use a mixture of equal parts of BROWN and GREEN materials to speed up the process.
BROWN: dry leaves, straw, sawdust, newspaper
GREEN: grass, vegetable scraps

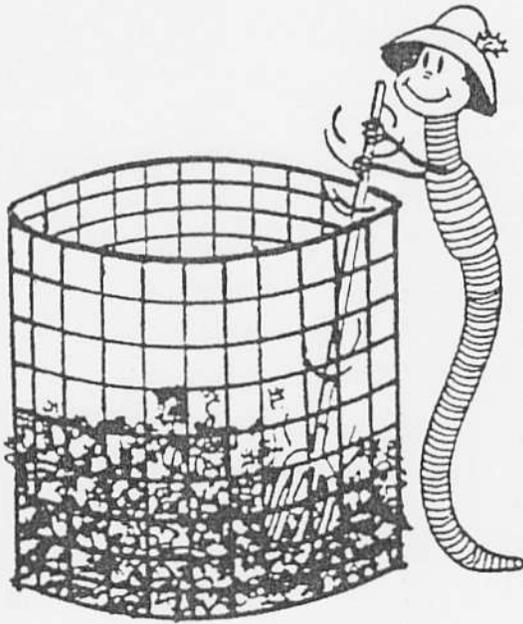
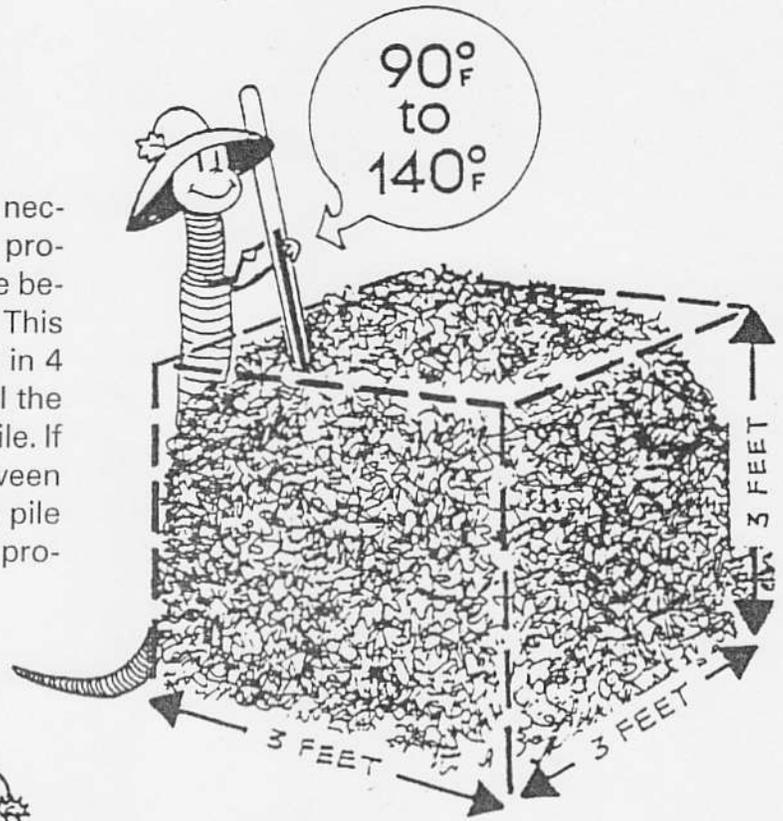
- 2) Fill the bin with kitchen and yard waste. Shredded or chopped materials decompose faster. Check the [Quick Check Guide](#) for a list of organic materials to include.



- 4) Adjust the moisture to the compost pile. If the pile is too wet add straw or sawdust; add water to a dry pile. The moisture level of the pile should have the consistency of a wrung-out sponge.

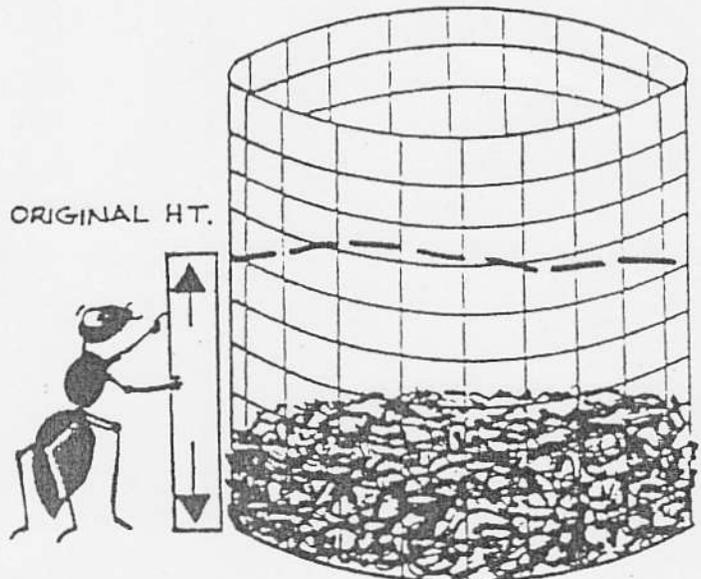


- 5) Check the pile for heat. Heat is a necessary part of the composting process. The temperature should be between 90° - 140° F or 32° - 60° C. This temperature should be reached in 4 or 5 days. Use your hand to feel the amount of heat in the compost pile. If you don't feel a difference between the outside and the inside of the pile add more greens to activate the process.



- 6) Turn the compost pile. Your pile needs oxygen to work efficiently. You'll notice that in 4-7 days the temperature peaks and then begins to fall. You may need to dismantle your compost bin to turn over the pile.

- 7) The pile will begin to shrink and settle. This is a positive sign that the compost is working properly.

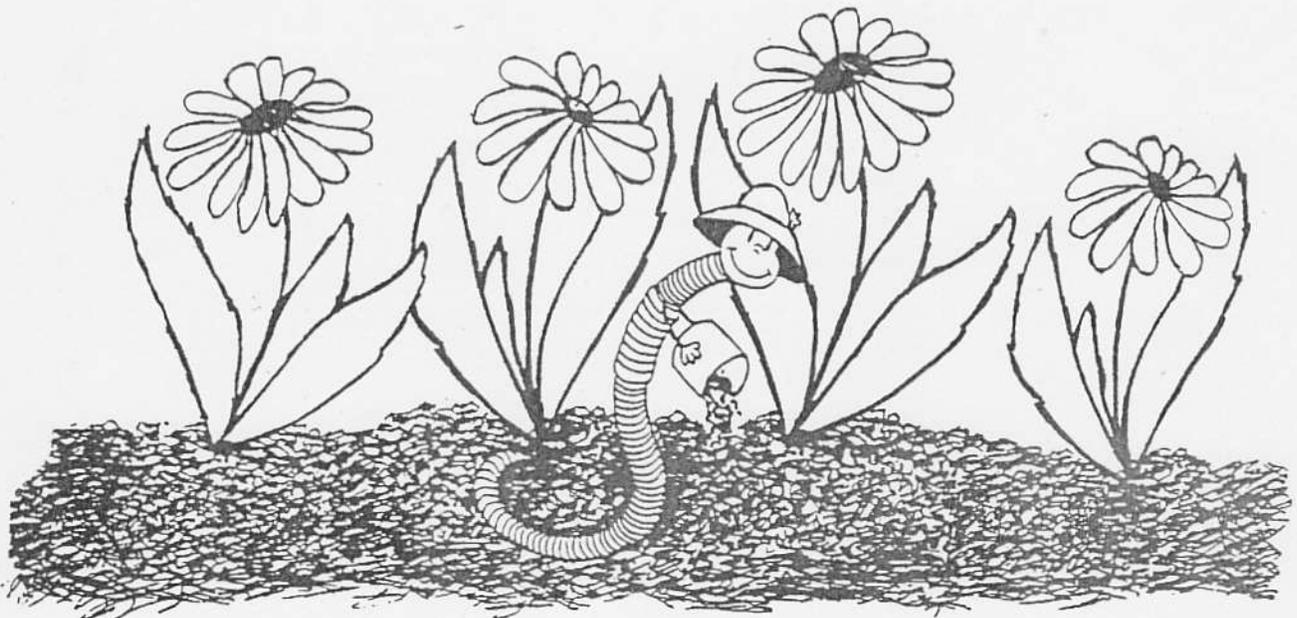


- 8) If you turn your pile every week, it should be ready to use in 1-2 months. If you don't turn the pile frequently, it will take 6-12 months.



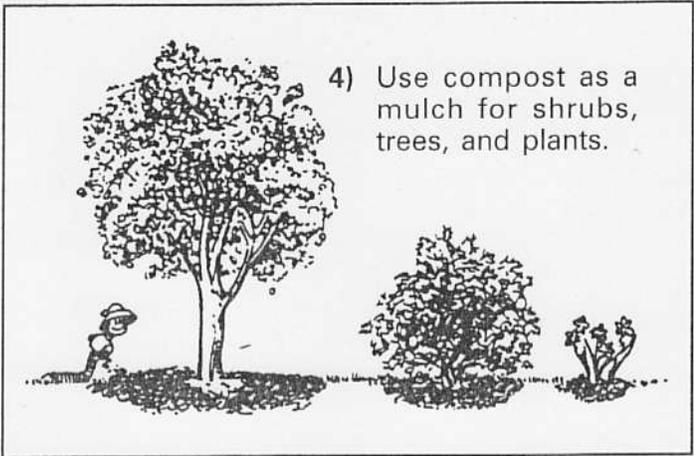
- 9) Your compost should be a dark, crumbly, soil-like material. It should also have a sweet, earthy smell.

- 10) Feed compost to plants by mixing it with the soil. Use compost in gardens, potted plants, or as a mulch around shrubs to keep weeds down and help retain moisture.



WHAT CAN I DO WITH MY COMPOST?

- 1) Spread compost on your garden before rototilling or turning the soil in the spring. Then mix the compost into the soil while rototilling or turning.

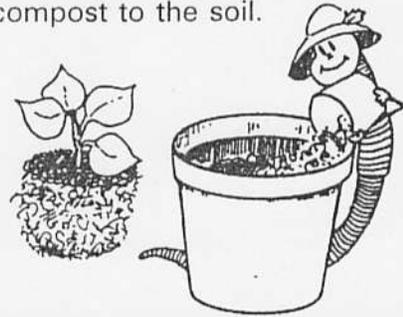


- 4) Use compost as a mulch for shrubs, trees, and plants.

- 2) Place or bury compost in your garden between plant rows. The plant roots will grow into the compost and take up the nutrients.



- 5) When transplanting house plants, add compost to the soil.



- 3) In flower gardens, dig in compost around the plants.



DONT•DONT•DONT•DONT•DONT•DONT Composting Don't

Don't use compost to sprout tender seeds. The seeds may be killed by a fungus in the compost that causes damping-off disease.



DONT•DONT•DONT•DONT•DONT•DONT

AMOUNTS OF COMPOST TO USE

<u>USE FOR</u>	<u>AMOUNT</u>	<u>HOW TO USE</u>
Annual Flowers	2"	Mix into top 4-6" of soil before planting.
Perennial Flowers	3-4"	Mix into top 8-12" of soil before planting.
Home Lawns	1-2"	Mix into the top 4-6" of soil before seeding, or , add 1-2" as top-dressing to existing lawns and rake in.
Trees & Shrubs	3-4"	Mix into top 6-10" of the entire planting area before digging planting hole.
Vegetable Gardens	2"	Mix into top 6" of soil before planting.

COMPOSTING DO'S AND DON'TS

- DO mix finished compost with topsoil to prepare garden or flower beds.
- DO mix manure (if available) or high nitrogen fertilizer with yard waste.
- DO add lime, small amounts of wood ashes or crushed eggshells to neutralize acids which may form in compost and cause an odor problem.
- DO mix grass clippings in thoroughly because they tend to compact.
- DO thoroughly mix kitchen waste into the pile to prevent the pile from attracting rodents or insects
- DO add soil to the pile to provide a source of microorganisms.
- DO use the compost as soon as possible when done. Store in plastic bag if ground is frozen.
- DON'T use unfinished compost. It will rob your plants of nitrogen instead of acting as a fertilizer. You can also spread garden diseases with unfinished compost.
- DON'T compost weeds that are heavily laden with seeds.
- DON'T ignore strong odors. Simply turn the pile when odors are detected.
- DON'T add meat, fish scraps or dairy products to compost. They may attract animals.
- DON'T add diseased vegetable plants to the compost pile if compost will be used on a vegetable garden. The diseased organism may reappear next year.
- DON'T locate a compost pile where drainage is poor or water may stand.

WHAT TO COMPOST?

A compost pile should have 2/3 carbon materials to 1/3 nitrogen materials. It is always better to put a little too much nitrogen in so the pile heats properly.

"BROWNS" (Carbon)

Autumn Leaves
Cornstalks
Straw
Pine Needles
Paper/Cardboard (Shredded)
Wood Chips, Saw Dust
Hay

"GREENS" (Nitrogen)

Alfalfa
Grass Clippings
Manure (cow, horse, chicken, rabbit)
Food Wastes (fruit & vegetables,
coffee grounds, tea bags,
eggshells)
Aquatic Weeds

DO NOT ADD TO COMPOST

Butter
Bones
Cat Manure
Cheese
Chicken
Diseased plants or leaves
Dog Manure
Fish Scraps
Lard

Mayonnaise
Meat
Milk
Oils
Peanut Butter
Persistent Weeds (poison ivy)
Salad Dressing
Sour Cream
Vegetable Oil

HINTS

--Grass clippings should be left on your lawn to add nutrients to the soil. A year's worth of clippings is equal to one application of fertilizer. However, do not leave large clumps of grass on the lawn.

--Smaller pieces will compost faster. Chop up thick vegetable stalks, shred newspaper and cardboard. Shred leaves before adding.

--Be careful when adding material with a lot of seeds such as tomatoes. Seeds do not compost very well. You may find tomato plants in strange places in your garden next spring!

QUICK CHECK GUIDE



<u>SYMPTOM</u>	<u>PROBLEM</u>	<u>HOW TO FIX</u>
FOUL ODOR	Not enough air	Turn pile.
	Too much nitrogen	Add straw, sawdust or wood chips.
	Too wet	Turn pile. Add straw, sawdust or wood chips.
AMMONIA ODOR	Too much nitrogen	Add carbon materials (i.e. sawdust, leaves, woodchips or straw).
PILE NOT HEATING	Pile is too small	Make pile larger.
	Pile is too dry	Add water.
	Poor aeration	Mix pile.
	Not enough nitrogen	Add more nitrogen materials, and then mix (i.e. grass, manure).
PILE TOO HOT	Pile is too large	Make pile smaller.
	Needs ventilation	Turn pile.
ATTRACTS ANIMALS	Meat or other animal products have been added	Remove all meat and dairy products. Mix kitchen waste into center of pile.
CENTER IS DRY	Not enough water	Add water, turn pile.
PILE DAMP AND WARM IN MIDDLE ONLY	Too small	Collect more materials and make pile bigger.
VERY WET WEATHER	Too much water	Cover pile with tarp or plastic sheet or bag.



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Funded by the PA Dept. of Environmental Protection.