

# HOME GROUNDS FACT SHEET

CORNELL

Cooperative Extension  
Nassau County



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## Compost for the Home Garden

Compost is a valuable addition to the soil. Its presence improves the soil by binding particles together, increasing its water-holding capacity and releasing nitrogen and other nutrients for plant use.

### Materials to compost

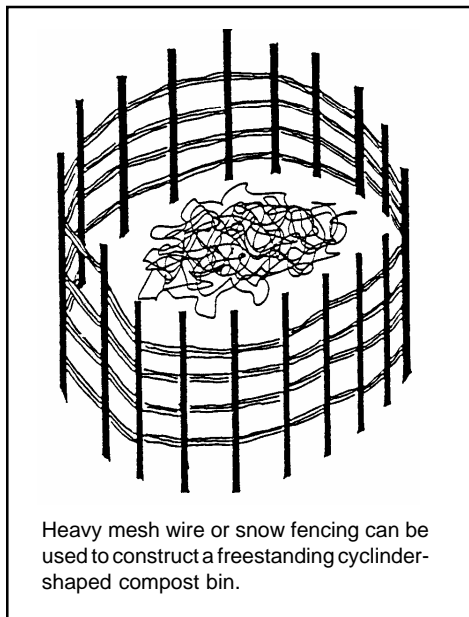
Practically any plant material can be composted for garden use. Leaves are ideal. Old sod, manure, lawn clippings, fine wood, straw, hay and plant refuse from the vegetable garden or kitchen can be used, providing it is free of insects and diseases.

### Diseased plants from the flower or vegetable garden should not be used for composting.

Avoid composting weeds heavily laden with seeds. Some weeds may be killed during composting, but many may be returned to the garden with the compost, creating an unnecessary weed problem. Most garbage can be used in the compost heap, but grease, fat, bones, fish and meat scraps should be avoided. They attract dogs or other animals and may develop an odor during decomposition. Fats are slow to break down and greatly increase the length of time required before the compost can be used. Pet wastes and kitty litter should not be used.

### Building a compost pile

The homeowner can easily make compost. The basic method is layering ingredients in mixed proportions. Air, moisture and turning the heap provides the proper conditions for bacterial action. Supplements high in nitrogen furnishes the nutrients the soil organisms require for rapid growth. If leaves or other ingredients high in carbon are used, additional nitrogen will be required to prevent excessive loss of bulk.



Heavy mesh wire or snow fencing can be used to construct a freestanding cyclinder-shaped compost bin.

The ideal compost pile is moist, not waterlogged. A soggy pile can smother organisms and slow down the compost process.

Building a compost pile is not an exact process. Usually organic material is accumulated in some out-of-the-way corner of the garden. Fall is a convenient time to make a compost pile because leaves and refuse from the garden are available. The compost pile can be on open ground or in a bin made of rough boards or stakes and small mesh wire fencing. The sides of the bin should not be tight, because oxygen is essential for decay. To start a pile, part of the refuse is spread out in a layer six to eight inches deep. The pile should be large enough for at least four or five layers to be made from the material available. Fertilizer (10-10-10) can be spread on each layer at the rate of 1/4 pound or 1/2 cupful to each 15-20 square feet. For an organic source of added nitrogen, commercially available fertilizers such as dried blood, (13% nitrogen), cottonseed meal (6% nitrogen), alfalfa hay (2.5% nitrogen) or poultry manure (1% nitrogen) can be used. If alkaline compost is desired, ground limestone can be spread on the pile at the same rate. Sprinkling a few shovelfuls of garden soil over each layer will ensure the presence of decay organisms.

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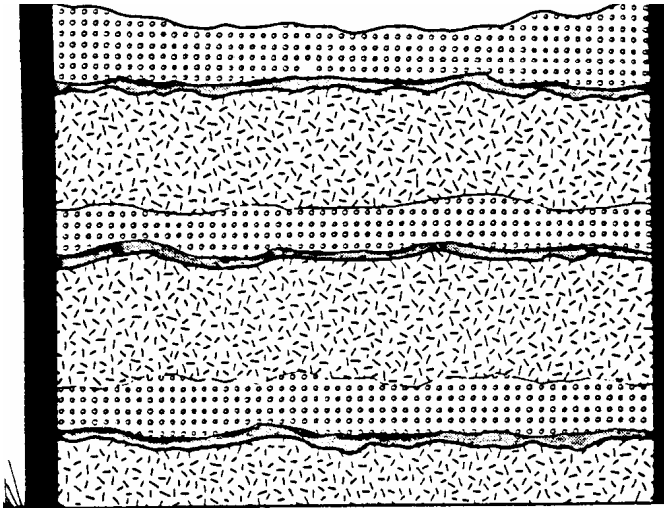
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The material in each layer should be moistened thoroughly. Successive layers are built in this way until all plant refuse is used. Building the pile with a flat top that slants toward the center to catch rainfall is advantageous.

Undesirable heating may occur in a large pile that is not well moistened. This is indicated by the giving off of steam. Applying water stops the heating process. Decay can be hastened by forking over the pile in midsummer and supplying water to parts that have remained dry. The compost will be ready for use at the end of the first summer season. It should be used before it loses all its structure. If uniformly fine textured material is desired, a longer time may be necessary.



Cross section of layering in compost pile

← Soil

← Organic materials

← Soil, 1-2 inches

← Fertilizer, see text for amount, or manure, 1-2"

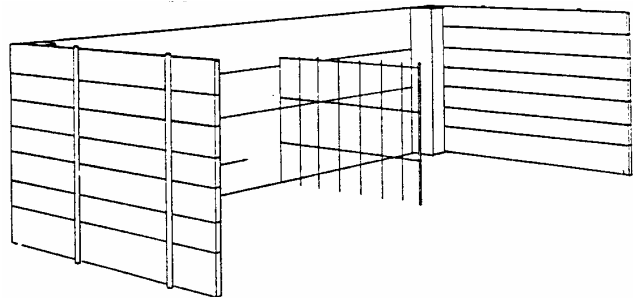
← Organic materials (hay, straw, grass clippings, wood chips), 6-8"

← Soil

← Organic materials

Organic matter can be used as a mulch without composting, although uncomposted material is harder to handle and may be unsightly. Lawn clippings can be recycled directly onto the lawn. This provides extra nitrogen and decreases the amount of fertilizer needed each year.

A double-bin system facilitates the procedure of forking over compost material. After the compost is allowed to partially decompose in one bin, it can be moved to the adjacent empty bin, a lower center wall in the bin making the transfer of compost easier. Bins can be constructed of material such as scrap lumber, snow fence, railroad ties or cinder block. Bins constructed of pressure-treated lumber are relatively expensive, but will last for many years. The exact dimensions of the bin are not critical. For a typical home garden a bin 3-4 feet in height and 5-8 feet square will suffice.



## Applying compost

The preferred time to apply fully-matured compost is a month or so before planting. The closer to planting time, the finer it should be and more thoroughly hoed into your soil. For best results compost should be applied from one to three inches per year. Compost should be covered if it won't be used until the following spring. If it is kept through the summer it should be watered from time to time.