

Composting at Home 101: Dig into Your Trash

If you haven't already figured it out, humans are pretty trashy creatures. [According to the EPA](#), every person in the United States generates an average of 4.9 pounds of garbage per day. Ewww.

About 32% of that waste (which the EPA calls "municipal solid waste" or MSW) is either recycled or composted. While these numbers continue to climb bit by bit every year, there's still a lot of room for improvement - especially when it comes to composting food waste. [The EPA reports](#) that just 4.1% of food and other MSW organics were composted in 2018. That is a sad, sad statistic.

Thankfully it's not all bad news: lawn trimmings were composted at a rate of 63% in 2018, likely due to local communities offering yard waste collection. Unfortunately, most cities don't collect food waste. (If only our government would [follow South Korea's lead](#) on this issue!) But until that happens, it's up to environmentally conscious citizens (that's you!) to improve that dismal 4.1% food composting statistic. And the best way to start is by learning the basics of composting at home.



What is composting?

I hate to break it to you, but everything that grows also dies then decomposes – it's just the way things work. Now that you're officially depressed, let's talk about why this matters: composting.

Composting is basically the process of recycling organic matter (like food scraps, leaves, and grass) and turning it into rich fertilizer. This already happens naturally

through the decomposition process, but with composting, you're essentially speeding up Mother Nature.

And the good news is that fertilizer will provide nourishment to other plants and soil. It's the circle of life in action - what once was dead can now promote new growth!

Why should I bother composting at home?

There are countless reasons why you should start composting at home. A few of them include:

- Composting at home reduces the amount of waste going to the landfill
- Throwing out less organic waste = methane gas emissions from decomposing waste in the landfill are reduced
- Your carbon footprint is lowered when you compost from home
- Composting reduces the need for chemical fertilizers
- Using compost enriches soil, retains moisture, reduces erosion, suppresses plant diseases, and provides carbon sequestration

In essence, composting makes Mother Nature happy. And we're all better off when Mother Nature is happy.

What materials can be composted?

You'd be surprised at the amount of material you can put on your compost pile. Things like:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Eggshells
- Tea and tea bags
- Coffee grounds and filters
- Nut shells
- Cardboard
- Paper
- Yard trimmings
- Grass clippings
- Houseplants
- Hay and straw
- Leaves
- Sawdust
- Cotton and wool cloth

- Hair and fur
- Fireplace ashes

Materials that can be composted are usually separated into two different types: greens and browns. I know, I can already hear you asking, “What are greens and browns?” Well, the names can be a bit misleading – color alone doesn’t determine whether a material qualifies as a green or a brown. For example, coffee grounds are considered a green.

The primary determining factor is what the material contributes to the compost pile: greens provide nitrogen while browns provide carbon. Examples of greens include grass clippings, recently pulled weeds, fresh manure, vegetable peelings and other food waste. Wood chips, straw, dry leaves, and corn stalks are examples of brown materials.

For the best results, your compost pile should have two to four parts brown material to every one-part green material.

Is there anything that shouldn’t be composted?

Yep, there are plenty of materials that need to stay far, far away from your compost bin, such as:

- Diseased plants
- Glossy paper
- Animal bones and meat
- Dairy products
- Pet waste
- Coal ash
- Fats or grease of any kind
- Cuttings from chemically treated grass

How do I get started with composting?

Well, the first thing to do is to stop throwing food waste in the trash or shoving it down the garbage disposal. Seriously, stop it.

But now we need to figure out where you’re going to put that food waste. There are a few options to choose from, depending upon how much space you have, how much waste you produce, and how much time you have to spend on your new eco-friendly hobby.

Outdoor Composting

If you have a yard and generate a decent amount of food and yard waste, then outdoor composting will probably work well for you. First, you'll need to find a dry, shady spot in your backyard that measures about [3 feet wide, high, and deep](#). Then you'll need to decide what type of bin you'd like to use. There are three basic choices: closed bin, open bin, and tumbler bin.

A **closed bin** is just like it sounds – it's an enclosed structure that helps retain heat and moisture, which can speed up the composting process and ensure the best results. Closed bins also tend to have small holes on the side to improve airflow. Contents in a closed bin need to be aerated every three to seven days so the microbes breaking down your waste can get a bit of oxygen. Closed bins are available for purchase or can be made by hand (if you've been blessed with DIY skills.)

An **open bin** is a bit simpler to create – all you need is an area bordered with chicken wire. The primary disadvantage to open bins is those loosely contained food scraps that often attract critter visitors. Like with the closed bin, materials in the open bin should be turned every three to seven days.

If you don't have a lot of time to commit to building or maintaining a compost bin, then a **tumbler bin** might be the best option for you. These bins can be purchased at most gardening or home improvement stores. Mounted on an axle or base, all you have to do is turn a handle every few days to aerate your compost. Tumbler bins also tend to work a bit faster than other options: your compost could be ready in just three to eight weeks.

Indoor Composting

For those who live in an apartment or have limited outdoor space, there are a couple of composting options to choose from.

The simplest option is to purchase a **countertop compost bin**. They're easy to use – just pop your food scraps into the container and give it a quick stir to aerate. But there are a few downsides to countertop models: their capacity is limited and they often put off an unpleasant odor.

If you don't want compost brewing on your kitchen countertop, then there's an even better indoor option for you (especially if you're an animal lover): worm composting. Technically called vermicomposting, worm composting requires little ongoing maintenance: you simply feed the worms your food scraps once a week, keep them moist, then let them do their work. In three to six months time, you'll have nutrient rich worm poop, uh, I mean "fertilizer" ready to use!

Other Composting Options

If you're not ready to commit to at-home composting, there are still other ways you can help reduce food waste. For starters, talk to your local politicians about instituting a composting program; it may not happen immediately (or even soon) but at least you can try moving them in the right direction.

Even if your local politicians don't cooperate, you can still put your food waste to good use. There are companies all over the country that fill a valuable niche by offer composting services. Just conduct a quick search online and you're on your way to reducing food waste, improving that awful 4.1% composting rate, and putting a smile on Mother Nature's face.