DIY Composting

Theresa Badurek, UF/IFAS Extension, Pinellas County

What is compost? It’s the rich, dark, broken down organic matter created when the right waste materials are decomposed by a variety of micro-organisms. Compost is full of nutrients needed for plant growth and helps hold moisture in your garden soil. These are very important services, especially here in our dry, sandy, nutrient-poor soils in Florida.

Composting is an excellent way to recycle all kinds of waste materials into a valuable resource for your garden. Not only will your plants thank you, but you will also reduce the amount of garbage that you make. It’s a great way to “green” up your lifestyle and your garden!

How can I compost? Building a compost pile or bin can be done many different ways including a simple pile, a constructed unit, or even a fancy store-bought contraption. (To learn about building your own home compost unit, visit the resource link at the end of this fact sheet.) Here are some basic rules to follow for success:

- Locate the pile/bin in an area protected from wind and within reach of a hose (if it’s in the shade you will be happier when working there)
- Consider screening it from views for you and the neighbors
- Check that the pile/bin measures a minimum of 3’ high x 3’ deep x 3’ wide
- Cut up large pieces before composting; smaller pieces break down faster than large ones
- Layer equal amounts (you can “eyeball” this) of “greens” and “browns” in alternating 3”-4” layers (see the next section to learn more about this)
- Water each layer as you go—just to moisten, not to saturate
- Avoid composting weeds with seeds or plants with diseases

What are “greens” and “browns”? These are the two main ingredients you need to make compost happen. The “greens” are rich in nitrogen and the “browns” are rich in carbon. The best possible ratio of “browns” to “greens” (or C/N) is 30:1 or less, in alternating layers as described above. Here are a few examples:

**Greens**
- kitchen scraps
- farm animal manure
- grass clippings
- herbaceous plants

**Browns**
- fallen leaves
- twigs/chipped branches
- shredded newspaper/cardboard/paper

**IMPORTANT!** Raw manure must be applied/composted at least 90 days before harvesting a crop where the edible portion is not in contact with the soil (e.g., sweet corn) and at least 120 days before harvesting a crop where the edible portion does touch the soil (e.g., watermelons, potatoes).
How do I manage a compost pile/bin? The most important thing you need to do to keep the little micro-organisms working for you is to make sure they have air, water, and food. You do this by turning and watering (if it gets dry) your pile occasionally. Compost will heat up at first and eventually cool down. Turning the pile allows you to mix the materials which will allow the pile to heat up again. The hotter the pile gets, the more quickly it breaks down into compost. You can even take your compost pile’s temperature with a long thermometer. The ideal temperature range is between 122-131 degrees Fahrenheit. Compost is ready to use when it’s dark brown and crumbly.

I made compost! Now what? Compost is an excellent soil amendment that will add nutrients to your soil and help retain soil moisture. If you still have large pieces in your compost you can simply screen those out before use. The big pieces go back in the bin for more decomposing. Your finished compost can be added to your garden soil before planting or used on the surface like mulch. You can even use compost for a potting mix if you blend very fine compost with coarse sand to improve drainage.

What can I compost?

DO Compost:

Greens:
- Banana skins
- Kitchen scraps
- Spent/processed grains
- Fruits and vegetables
- Stale bread
- Eggshells
- Manures (cow, horse, chicken)
- Citrus fruit and peels (cut up)
- Coffee grounds
- Tea bags
- Weeds (without seeds)
- Corn meal
- Watermelon rind
- Rice
- Oatmeal
- Bone meal
- Feathers
- Flowers
- Grass clippings (untreated)

Browns:
- Straw and hay
- Dead insects
- Old potting soil mix
- Pine needles
- Peanut shells
- Wood shavings
- Newsprint (b&w or soy ink)
- Hair (human, animal)
- Dryer Lint
- Cardboard
- Birdcage “stuff”
- Wood chips
- Shredded hardwood
- Sawdust (not treated)
- Paper (b&w or soy ink)
- Dry leaves

DO NOT Compost:

- Meat, meat scraps
- Human waste
- Treated wood
- Colored newsprint
- Heavily colored paper
- Particleboard
- Grease, fat, oil
- Whole bones
- Poultry
- Treated sawdust
- Pressure treated wood
- Pesticide treated plants
- Seed-laden weeds
- Dairy products
- Used kitty litter
- Dog and cat feces
- Plywood
- Mayonnaise
- Butter
- Cheese
- Peanut Butter
- Salad dressing
- Vegetable oil
- Yogurt
- Milk

More composting resources:

Florida’s Online Composting Center: http://sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu/compost-info/
Living Green composting website: http://livinggreen.ifas.ufl.edu/waste/composting.html
Compost Happens Tutorial: http://sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu/compost-info/tutorial/

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