

Compost Myths and Facts

Composting does not require lots of money, lots of time or lots of mental energy. Composting is a simple, natural process that will happen in spite of the myths and misunderstandings that prevail. The spread of these myths has occurred by word of mouth, misguided publications and, worst of all, hard-core marketing. We encourage people to compost without getting bogged down with conflicting information. Keep composting inexpensive and simple. Help put to rest some of the popular myths and misunderstandings:

Bins

MYTH: "To compost, you have to have this kind of bin..."

FACT: There are an endless variety of commercial designs available from black plastic cubes with sliding doors to rotating drums to free-wheeling spheres. The prices range from tens to hundreds of dollars. Advertisements and popular literature lead many composting novices to believe that an enclosed bin is essential. The reality is that heaps or piles work just fine for composting. If you need to keep your pile tidy to avoid offending your neighbors, consider using wire mesh, or reusing scrap lumber, shipping pallets, cinder blocks or snow-fencing. Urban composters may need to contain their compost in sturdy bins with lids, bases and small apertures to keep out pests. (A perforated metal trash can is an excellent choice for city-dwellers,) If you want a prefabricated bin, consider volume before you buy: the more money often buys less capacity; the highest capacity models generally sell for less than \$40.

Bioactivators

MYTH: "To get your composting really cookin', you need this activator..."

FACT: While these products do contain "cultured" strains of bacteria, fungi, and other biological additives, the fact is that special inoculants are unnecessary. Recent studies suggest that there are approximately 10 trillion bacteria in a spoonful of garden soil. Every fallen leaf and blade of grass you add to your pile is already covered with hundreds of thousands of bacteria - more than enough to do the job.

Yeast, elixirs and worms

MYTH: "Have you tried...?!"

FACT: Some of the recommendations you might hear are just plain foolish. For example, some people suggest pouring Coca Cola into the pile to increase biological activity; it will increase, but mostly in the form of yellow jackets and ants. Adding yeast is a common, but expensive and useless, practice. Adding worms or worm cocoons has become popular due to some confusion with vermi-composting. Worms do a tremendous amount of good, but there is no need for the composter to purchase or transplant them: "build a pile and they will come."

Fertilizer

MYTH: "I heard that you should add fertilizer..."

FACT: Adding nitrogen-rich fertilizer to the pile is wasteful and expensive. More importantly, synthetically derived fertilizers contain high salt levels and other compounds which are harmful to worms and micro-organisms; they may impair the nitrogen-fixing ability of the bacteria and short-circuit the nitrogen cycle. If you feel that you must add nitrogen (perhaps to a pile made up of only carbon-rich leaves), always try to use organic sources first: spent grounds from a coffee shop, a neighbor's grass clippings, agriculture manures or dried blood.

Lime

MYTH: "...and then you should sweeten the pile..."

FACT: Even if a gardener makes compost with a high proportion of acid-rich materials, it is a mistake to add lime to the pile to attempt to produce compost with a balanced pH. Unfortunately, adding ground limestone will turn your compost ecosystem into an ammonia factory, with nitrogen rapidly lost as a noxious gas. Finished compost is naturally nearly neutral.

Odors

MYTH: "...I'm sure I should do something special to keep it from smelling badly..."

FACT: Properly building and maintaining a compost pile results in compost that smells like a humus-rich forest floor. Odors usually result from mistakes: trying to compost grass clippings by themselves, adding protein rich food scraps or allowing too much water or too little air to get into the pile.

Rodents and pests

MYTH: "...we can't compost because it will attract pests..."

FACT: Compost piles that contain only garden wastes and that are turned often almost never attract pests. But because pests can be problematic in urban areas, you may want to turn your pile monthly avoid adding food scraps. Alternately, covering each addition of food scraps with a scoop of soil from the garden may reduce the foraging of pests.

Layers

MYTH: "...and you have to put the stuff in the pile this way..."

FACT: Building a compost pile by layering browns/greens/browns/greens (as in a lasagna style) lead to layers of anaerobic activity where the greens (nitrogen-rich, wet) are clumped together and little activity at all where the browns (carbon-rich, dry) are clumped together. If you're building a pile all at once, throw in an armful of browns, then an armful of greens, and add a little water as you go if your materials are dry. Then mix, stir, and fluff after every few additions for a hard-working compost stew.

Fourteen-day compost

MYTH: "...compost happens faster if you just..."

FACT: Magazine ads can hoodwink well-intentioned gardeners into thinking that they can and must produce compost in 14 days. Such expectations are not realistic and worthy. Decomposition takes time. While producing compost quickly has some merit, no one should feel compelled to purchase chipper-shredders or other elaborate equipment. In fact, if the material looks like compost after several weeks, it still requires an additional one-month maturation period before it should be used in the garden.

Compost chemistry

MYTH: "...and now for rocket science..."

FACT: There are lots of books, periodicals and composting brochures on the market (or on gardeners' shelves) that obsess on carbon-to-nitrogen ratios. Gardeners can be overwhelmed by the arcane charts, tables and formulas. In reality, compost piles thrive when different types of material (moist and dry, green and brown) are mixed together. And while ratios are fine for compost hobbyists or compost managers, regular gardeners need only remember that all organic materials will compost in a timely manner given some prudent attention.