



DC HOME COMPOSTING

HOW TO COMPOST IN YOUR BACKYARD



GOVERNMENT OF THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
MURIEL BOWSER, MAYOR

What Is Composting?

In composting, microbes and fungi break down organic matter into a nutrient-rich soil amendment. It is both a science and an art, where you need the right mixture of nitrogen (food waste, fresh grass clippings, etc.), carbon (leaves, straw, etc.), oxygen, and water.

What Are the Benefits?

Composting can help reduce methane emissions and lower your carbon footprint by diverting organic material from landfills and will help reach Mayor Bowser's Sustainable DC goals of 50% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and 80% waste diversion rate by 2032. Using compost in your garden enriches the soil and helps it retain moisture.



Types of Composters

- **Traditional Bins:** Enclosed single bin with a top. Great for adding material over time, but a shovel or pitch fork will be needed to turn the pile.
- **Tumblers:** A compost system that rotates. Good option if critters are a concern, but composting needs to happen in batches to allow time for material to finish curing. Consider a dual chamber tumbler so that you can continue to add material to one chamber while the other finishes curing.

The Ingredients

Greens and Browns

A general guideline is to start adding material in a 2-Browns to 1-Greens ratio by volume. Never add any of the "Do Not Add" material. If you are new to composting, lean towards adding more browns as this will help alleviate common issues like those in the Troubleshooting section below.

Greens:	Browns:	Do Not Add
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fruits• Vegetables• Crushed eggshells• Coffee grounds• Fresh grass clippings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leaves• Wood chips and twigs• Straw• Shredded newspaper• Shredded cardboard	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meat, bones, fat, oil• Dairy (milk, butter)• Eggs• Pet waste• Plastic• Metal• Biodegradable or compostable plastics• Recalled produce
		
		

Water and Oxygen

The greens and browns provide your composting bin with the needed nitrogen and carbon, but composting also needs water and oxygen to allow the microbes to do their work.

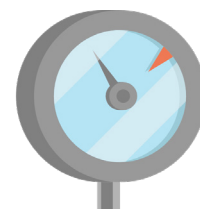
- **Water:** Depending on the moisture content of the food, the amount of water added to your bin will vary. Compost should be as moist as a wrung-out sponge (damp but not dripping wet). Add water as needed to achieve targeted moisture levels, particularly during the hotter months.
- **Oxygen:** To add oxygen to your compost, you need to turn the contents with a shovel or pitchfork every seven to 10 days. If you have a tumbler, you should turn it every three to four days.

The Steps

- 1. Learn.** Review educational material on how to learn how to successfully compost. For more tips and detailed instructions, register for a workshop at zerowaste.dc.gov or request a free copy of **Home Composting Made Easy** by emailing zero.waste@dc.gov.
- 2. Choose the right composter.** Traditional bins and tumblers come in different styles and all have different advantages. Do your research to pick a bin that will work for you.
- 3. Select a site.** For traditional bins and tumblers, pick a semi-shaded spot that is convenient to access. Address any existing critter issues before installing your composter. To help deter critters, position your composter three feet away from any structure or heavy brush.
- 4. Collect browns.** Traditional bins and tumblers need carbon rich materials, such as leaves or dead grass. It's best to collect this material early, so that it is ready to add to your composter.
- 5. Prepare greens.** Cut larger scraps into smaller pieces so that they will break down easier.
- 6. Use as directed.** Follow the guidelines or instructions that came with the composter. Be sure to mix in food scraps and browns in the correct amounts. Cover all food scraps with browns every time.
- 7. Monitor.** Composting at home can be an art and you should be prepared to adapt your process. Be sure to monitor your composter and immediately correct any issues. See Troubleshooting section below for common issues that may arise.
- 8. Harvest.** Finished compost will have an earthy smell. Once your compost is finished, harvest it by removing any bulky pieces, and add it to your garden!

Temperature Tips

- Temperature:** Making compost can take between one to eight months depending on the temperature of your compost pile. For quicker composting, your pile should reach a temperature of 120-155 degrees. A temperature probe can help with active compost management to achieve desired temperatures.
- Beware of Seeds:** If you add weeds or certain food scraps (such as tomatoes), make sure your compost gets hot enough to kill the seeds (around 140 F).
- Winter:** As the weather cools down, so will your pile. Be prepared for the process to take longer during the cold winter months.



Troubleshooting

- Ammonia odor?** Probably too much nitrogen-rich material (food scraps). Add carbon-rich material (browns).
- Smells like rotten eggs?** Pile is too wet or does not have enough oxygen. Turn pile and add dry carbon-rich material (browns).
- Critter issues?** Address immediately. Make sure you are not adding meat, dairy, or fatty foods. Add wire mesh to the bottom. Contact zero.waste@dc.gov if issues persist for more advice.
- Insect issues?** Make sure veggie and food scraps are not exposed by covering with leaves after you add food scraps.

Other Composting Options

Traditional bins and tumblers are not right for everyone. Consider one of these alternatives.

- **Worm Bins:** While related to traditional composting, they have different advantages and limitations. They could be used by people without a yard, but you must find a place that is kept at room temperature (garages and outdoors may get too hot/cold for worms). Pay close attention to manufacturer recommendations on how to set up your bin and add food. Not all food scraps are suitable for worms, such as onions or citrus fruits. Purchase worms specifically raised for composting and check to make sure they are properly shipped when ordered.
- **Community Compost Cooperatives:** Want to compost, but don't have the space at home? Join one of the District's 50+ Community Compost Co-op sites. Learn more at dpr.dc.gov/page/community-compost-cooperative-network.
- **Food Waste Drop-Off:** Like the idea of composting your food scraps, but don't have the space or time to do the composting? Bring your food waste to one of our designated farmers' market locations and let us do the composting for you. Learn more at zerowaste.dc.gov/foodwastedropoff.

Rebates Available for Home Composting Systems

District of Columbia residents can earn a rebate with a maximum value of \$75 for a home composting system through the Department of Public Works' Home Composting Program. The exact amount of the rebate is determined by a sliding-scale. Rebate amount is subject to change October 1 of each year. Residents are required to attend workshops as part of the eligibility requirements.

Learn more at zerowaste.dc.gov/homecomposting.

Other Resources

- Request a free copy of Home Composting Made Easy by emailing zero.waste@dc.gov
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Composting at Home web page: epa.gov/recycle/composting-home
- EPA's How to Create and Maintain an Indoor Worm Composting Bin: epa.gov/recycle/how-create-and-maintain-indoor-worm-composting-bin

Any person engaging in home composting also has the responsibility to ensure their bin is properly maintained. If you have questions or need troubleshooting tips, please contact DPW's Office of Waste Diversion at zero.waste@dc.gov or (202) 673-6833.



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