



# Backyard Composting

You've heard about it, but you are not really sure you want to do it.

Well, here's the dirt on composting. It's simple to do. All you need to get started is a little time, a little space, a bin and a basic understanding of the composting process.

Still not convinced? Composting helps protect the environment. Composting conserves natural resources. And composting saves you money.

Got your attention now? Good. Let's define composting.

You recycle, right? Well, composting is nature's way of recycling. Composting is the controlled natural decomposition of organic material (from plants and animals) such as leaves, yard trimmings, grass clippings and manure as well as fruit and vegetable scraps. Microorganisms break down this material into compost, a crumbly, dark-colored, earthy-smelling, soil-like material. That material is a nutrient-rich product that can be used in your garden, flower beds and lawn.

Composting can be practiced almost anywhere – including your backyard. Why on earth would you want to do that? There are lots of reasons.

## Benefits of Backyard Composting

There are many benefits to backyard composting.

- **Compost is a valuable product.** Compost improves soil by increasing aeration (the ability of air to circulate) and water-holding capacity (reducing your need to water) as well as helping plants absorb nutrients. Compost also helps suppress plant diseases and pests.
- **Compost reduces or eliminates chemical fertilizer and pesticide use.** That saves you money as well as helps protect the environment by reducing runoff pollution to nearby streams, rivers and lakes.
- ★ **Compost reduces the amount of waste a household generates.** Yard trimmings and food scraps make up about one-fourth of the total amount of municipal solid waste generated by households according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA). It is also important to remember that yard trimmings are biodegradable and generally clean.

Disposing of them in landfills often is unnecessary and is a waste of space.

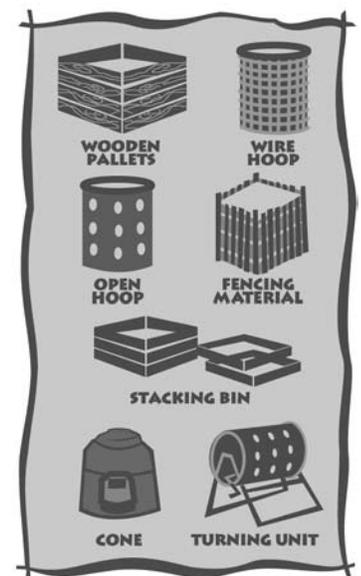
- **You save money.** You save money by buying fewer bags for garbage and leaves. You also save money by buying fewer bags of compost from retail outlets. You make your own valuable product at home for free.

## Want to get started? Let's break it down.

Backyard composting can be as basic or as fancy as you like. How much time and effort do you want to spend on it? How quickly do you want results? You may want to begin with a simple approach.

- **Location, location, location.** Pick a spot in your yard (you will need an area about 3 feet by 3 feet) that is at least 2 feet from a structure like your house or a fence. The spot should be partially shaded so that the sun doesn't dry your compost too quickly (but try to stay away from large trees that may penetrate your compost with roots). The spot should be convenient for you to add materials, have access to water and have good drainage. You may want to plan for extra space around your pile to make turning and harvesting your compost easier.

- **Begin with the bin.** You can build a compost pile on the ground, but using a compost bin will help keep your compost pile neat and tidy, deter rodents from digging into your pile and help your pile retain heat and moisture. Compost bins can be homemade or purchased. Homemade bins can easily be built out of wood, wire mesh and scrap pallets. You even can build a compost corral with concrete blocks or chicken wire. Some manufactured bins include turning units, cone shaped bins and bins with stacking tiers. Some are wood and some are plastic (sometimes recycled plastic). These bins can



be purchased at nurseries and garden centers or directly from the manufacturer. Bins are available in a wide range of prices. Take the time to consider your options and what works best for you.

- **Size matters.** Ideally, your compost pile should be at least 3 feet wide, three feet deep and three feet tall – big enough to work and small enough to be easily turned. Backyard compost piles probably should not be larger than 5 feet by 5 feet by 5 feet.
- **Guess who's coming to dinner?** Making compost is a lot like cooking a meal. You take some basic ingredients, add water, mix well and let it cook over a given period of time. You could have finished compost ready to use in as little as 12 weeks.

Four basic ingredients are required for composting – greens, browns, water and air. Mixing the proper amounts of these ingredients will provide the composting organisms (microbes and insects) with enough nitrogen, moisture and oxygen to break down the material effectively.

Greens include green leaves, fresh clippings and vegetable scraps. Do not add any meat or dairy products. Browns include dead leaves, wood chips, dry twigs and paper.

Water is important. Too little moisture will inhibit the composting process. Too much moisture will cause the

compost pile to smell. Here's a simple rule to follow – the compost pile should be as moist as a sponge.

Air is essential. Turn your compost pile once or twice a week to inhibit odor-causing bacteria and to speed up the composting process.

### Where can you get help?

The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control's Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling (Office) offers workshops, printed materials and other assistance through its Gardening & Recycling Organics Wisely (GROW) program.

To learn more about GROW or composting, call **1-800-768-7348** or visit [www.scdhec.gov/environment/lwm/recycle/compost.htm](http://www.scdhec.gov/environment/lwm/recycle/compost.htm). The Office also offers a composting guide "Home Composting Made Easy" at no charge. (Call for availability.)

Many local governments also offer workshops, often with opportunities to buy compost bins at reduced prices or at cost. Check with your local recycling coordinator.

Clemson University Extension Service offers composting and mulching information at [www.clemson.edu/extension](http://www.clemson.edu/extension) or [hgic.clemson.edu](http://hgic.clemson.edu).

The U.S. EPA offers a wealth of composting information on its Web site. You can begin at [www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/composting/backyard.htm](http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/composting/backyard.htm).

**DID YOU KNOW?** South Carolina and most other states – in order to encourage recycling and save landfill space – do not allow grass clippings and other yard trimmings to be disposed of in municipal solid waste (MSW) landfills. The intent of the law is to encourage local governments to set up large-scale mulching and composting operations. Unfortunately, in many South Carolina counties that has not happened and the yard trimmings are disposed of at a different type of (non-MSW) landfill. There are counties, however, that divert yard trimmings to mulching or composting facilities that use the end product beneficially in landscaping and other similar applications.



Office of Solid Waste  
Reduction & Recycling  
**1-800-768-7348** ● [www.scdhec.gov/recycle](http://www.scdhec.gov/recycle)

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