

## Composting Tips

(by Becky Stoughton)

Among other welcome signs of spring comes the increased potential for composting, due both to increased raw materials (from cleaning out our garden beds and throughout the growing season) and Mother Nature's help with heating up natural decomposition after the winter slowdown. (Although it is certainly possible to compost throughout the winter, as [this article from UNH](#) describes.)

According to the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke University, over 51 percent of the trash that goes to landfills (food scraps, paper, yard trimmings, and wood) is compostable. Aside from the excess methane gas produced as a result (which contributes to global warming), we gardeners recognize the potential for turning that trash into compost for our gardens (affectionately known as "black gold").

One key to successful composting is getting the right mix of "greens" (materials high in nitrogen, like grass clippings) and "browns" (materials high in carbon, like dry leaves). Use 1/3 (by volume) greens, and 2/3 browns as you build your pile. If you find it hard to achieve that mix on a day-to-day basis, as I do, you can leave part of what you collect off your pile but somewhere nearby, and then add it to the pile over time to get the right ratio. Another key is to try to keep the pile about the consistency of a wrung-out sponge at all times by adding water or covering the pile as needed.

When adding damp greens (such as fresh grass clippings) to the pile either add them in very thin layers, mix them with dry absorbent materials like leaves, or simply let them dry a bit first. This step alleviates anaerobic decomposition, which is the cause of odors in compost piles. Also, try to use a wide variety of ingredients in your pile, as it creates a richer compost with a balance of nutrients for your plants.

When you add weeds to your pile, there is no need to shake off all the dirt, as soil is one of the best ways to activate the decomposition of the pile. What a great use for those weeds! Of course, be sure not to put weed seeds or plants that spread aggressively through their roots (like bittersweet) into the pile!

Last spring, I got a good batch of compost from one of my piles and added to the second over the summer. In the fall, I was disappointed, as it appeared that the second pile was not going to yield more compost for fall top-dressing.



So I decided to turn the pile and make sure it was consistently wet prior to winter setting in. Once I started removing the top layer, I was delighted to find that I actually had three full wheelbarrows full of finished compost! (See pictures.)



Whether you are already composting but want to learn more, or you are just considering getting started, there is a wealth of information out there to help you. Here are a few resources I recommend:

- [How To Compost at Home](#) (NPR blog article and podcast. Includes list of things that should and should not be composted.)
- [Trash to Treasure: The Incredible Benefits of Composting](#) (University of Michigan School of Public Health)
- [Composting: How To make nutrient-rich garden “gold” in the composter that will help your garden thrive](#) (Eartheasy)

Happy composting! And let me know how it goes!