

SAMPLE HOW-TO COLUMN

Save your garden, your money and the Earth!

Is your garden being neglected in these economically tough times? Well, here's a simple, inexpensive solution that will enrich your soil and your wallet: start a composting pile in your backyard.

By collecting biodegradable materials, such as yard trimmings, food waste and paper products in a pile or bin, composting creates a nutrient-rich soil for gardening that prevents the need for chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and promotes healthy foliage and growth. And it's a great way to save money!

Getting started

1. Select a convenient spot for composting. The spot should be semi-shaded and well drained. Don't put your compost pile under acid producing trees like pines. If you do not have space for an outdoor compost pile, you can use a bin indoors. The bin can be purchased or made at home.
2. Combine organic wastes such as yard trimmings, food wastes and biodegradable products into a pile, then add bulking agents such as wood chips to accelerate the breakdown of organic materials.
3. A properly managed compost bin or pile will not attract pests or rodents and will not smell badly.
4. Typical compost will turn into rich soil in two to five weeks.

What and what not to compost

Few Americans realize that nearly 50 percent of the waste from their home is compostable. If every American household composted, we could reduce our solid waste stream by more than 60 percent!

So what should you add to that compost pile? A number of paper products are good for composting, such as shredded newspapers, cardboard rolls and paper plates. However, paper products should not include plastic or staples, or use toxic inks.

"It's best to look for products that are biodegradable and endorsed by the U.S. Composting Council," advised Julie Stoetzer, spokesperson for Chinet, which recently made its Classic White and Casuals line of paper plates chlorine-free and 100 percent biodegradable.

In addition to paper, wood chips and yard trimmings are essential to composting. Other biodegradable materials, like hay, straw, grass clippings, saw dust and leaves can be added to compost piles, with the exception of black walnut leaves, which release chemicals that are harmful to plants. Also, don't include diseased or insect-ridden plants,

or plants treated with chemicals or pesticides; these, too, will make the compost harmful or toxic.

Feel free to add food items, like fruits and vegetables, eggshells and nutshells to your compost pile, as well as non-produce household items, like coffee grounds and filters, tea bags, dryer and vacuum lint, hair and fur, and fireplace ashes. Do not include coal or charcoal ash from the grill, though, as they contain substances that are harmful to plants.

Also, be sure to avoid adding food and organic matter that will make the compost pile smell, such as dairy products, egg yolks (whites are okay), and fats, grease, lard and oils. Meat and fish scraps are compostable, but make sure they do not contain parasites, bacteria and germs.

Remember, by reducing your carbon-footprint and your need for chemical fertilizers and pesticides, you're saving money, too. And that's something everyone can be happy about.

For more information on composting and what materials to use, check out the Environmental Protection Agency's Web site, located at <http://www.epa.gov/waste/conserve/rrr/composting/basic.htm>.