

## Guide to Home Composting

### Practice the 4Rs of Organic Waste Management for a Healthier Yard and Garden:

- **Reduce** yard waste: Grasscycle by leaving grass clippings on the lawn.
- **Reuse** yard waste: Use leaves as mulch and put brush chip and wood waste to use as ornamental mulch and weed control.
- **Recycle** yard and food waste: Compost organic wastes to produce mulch and valuable soil conditioner.
- **Respond** by telling others about the benefits of composting at home.

### The Basics of Home Composting

Composting is a natural process in which microorganisms break down organic materials - such as leaves, grass, and vegetable scraps - to form a rich, soil-like substance.

### Key Elements

- **Organic Materials** - A good mix of materials for successful composting consists of two parts “browns” (materials such as dead leaves that are high in carbon) and one part “greens” (such as fresh grass clippings and garden prunings that are high in nitrogen).
- **Moisture** - Composting materials should feel moist like a damp sponge but not overly soggy.
- **Temperature** - Compost should feel warm to the touch except in cold winter months.
- **Air** - When materials decompose without oxygen, they can create unpleasant odors. Turn compost regularly to ensure that air reaches the center of the pile.

### Ingredients

“Browns”	“Greens”	Microorganism Sources
Leaves	Grass	Old compost
Dead plants	Green weeds	Garden soil
Straw	Manure	Farm animal manure
Shredded paper	Coffee grounds	Commercial compost starters
Shredded twigs	Kitchen scraps (non-meat, non-dairy, nonfat)	
Sawdust (untreated wood)		

### Getting Started

A 4'x4'x4' area out of direct sunlight is ideal for a compost pile. Choose an easily accessible spot on a grass or soil base. Composting can begin any time of the year, but it is easy to start in the fall, when leaves are abundant. Mix the ingredients and add water so the materials feel as damp as a wrung-out sponge.

Add a shovelful of garden soil or finished compost to the compost pile. This adds the essential microorganisms needed to break down the waste into compost.

The pile should be turned after a few weeks so that outside ingredients are exchanged with the ingredients from the center of the pile. Turn compost piles about once a month, except in cold winter conditions. If more water is necessary, it can be added during turning.

## Using Compost

Compost is ready for use when it looks dark and crumbly and none of the starting ingredients are visible. One way to test if compost is finished is to seal a small sample in a plastic bag for 24 to 48 hours. If no strong odors are released when you open the bag, the compost is finished and ready to be used.

As a soil amendment, compost increases water retention, adds nutrients, and increases soil health. Work it into the top 6 to 8 inches of the soil when planting. Compost can also be applied as a mulch directly around the base of trees and shrubs.

## Compost Troubleshooting

Problem	Solution
Too wet	Turn, add dry material; cover compost
Dry, appears dusty	Turn, water, shade compost
Cool to the touch	Turn, add “greens”
Too warm to the touch, strong odors	Turn, add soil or “browns”; add water
Strong odors	Turn; add “browns”

### Don't compost:

- Diseased plants or leaves
- Plants that have gone to seed
- Persistent weeds (poison ivy, multiflora rose, bindweed, quackgrass)
- Meat, dairy products, and kitchen vegetables cooked with animal fats.
- Human or pet feces

## Grasscycling for a Low-Maintenance Yard

Grass clippings make up a large percentage of the household waste produced each year. About 1,000 square feet of lawn can produce 200 to 500 pounds of clippings during a Pennsylvania growing season.

Grasscycling is a simple alternative to bagging grass clippings. Simply leave the clippings on your lawn, where they break down in 7 to 14 days. The grass clippings act as top-dressing fertilizer and help keep your lawn green and healthy.

### Grasscycling Tips

- Mow when grass is not wet and use a sharp mower blade.
- Don't let large clumps of grass clippings accumulate on the lawn.
- Don't overuse harsh chemicals and fertilizers. Look for organic brands.
- If possible, use a mulching mower that chops the clippings into smaller pieces.

Use grass clippings as a surface mulch around vegetables or flowers to inhibit weed growth and retain soil moisture. Remember to keep clippings at least two inches away from young plants to avoid burning the new growth with excess nitrogen.

Add grass clippings to your compost pile for extra nutrients and to speed up the composting process. To avoid odors, grass clippings should comprise no more than one-third of the pile.

For more detailed information about composting and recycling in Pennsylvania, visit the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Bureau of Waste Management, Recycling in Pennsylvania website at: <https://www.dep.pa.gov/Business/Land/Waste/Recycling>. If you have a printed version of this fact sheet and no longer need it, pass it onto a friend or shred and compost it.

For more information, visit [www.dep.pa.gov](http://www.dep.pa.gov).