

Baltimore City's Guide to Home Composting



Are you considering composting at home, but don't know where to begin? Here are some easy-to-remember steps to get you started.

Set Up Your Space

Food is going to rot, no matter what. All you have to do is help this process. You do not need any fancy technology - you just want to make sure the composting option you choose fits well with your life. If you have room in your yard and the temperature where you live is moderate, you can fence off an area (3 x 3 x 3 feet is considered ideal) and start your scrap pile directly on the ground. For a tidier arrangement, buy or make bins to contain your organic waste or drums that tumble and aerate it - which helps to convert the materials to compost even faster. See more details [on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's website](#). Even apartment dwellers can get in on the action: Indoor bins stocked with red worms, critters you can order online, process food scraps in a smaller space. (This NRDC Tumblr post tells you [how to get started](#).)

Master The Mix

A pile of decomposing food might sound like the last thing you want in your backyard or under your sink. If you do it right, you'll hardly notice it's there. Composting is about having the proper balance of materials. If you create the proper balance of materials, you'll have aerobic conditions, and the microorganisms that thrive there break down scraps with little to no odor. There's an easy, color-coded formula to make sure this happens. Add two or three parts carbon-heavy "browns" for every one part nitrogen-centric "greens." The "browns" include shredded newspaper and other paper, dead leaves, and food-soiled paper napkins. (Just don't use any coated, shiny paper, including milk cartons—they won't break down sufficiently—or any treated or painted wood.) For "greens," toss in fruit and vegetable bits (scrape off any plastic stickers first), breads and grains, coffee grounds and filters, and grass clippings. To stash your scraps until you're ready to haul them out to the yard, you may find it convenient to designate a pail under the sink or a bag in the freezer.

Be Selective With Your Scraps

There are a few food scraps that should still go out with the trash (or into your curbside "green" bin, if you're lucky enough to live in a city that accepts food



scraps for centralized composting). Meat, bones, and dairy products don't belong in the typical household compost pile. Why? Most home composters cannot guarantee the internal heat generated by their compost pile will reach the temperatures required to kill pathogens. Plus, meat and dairy may cause rodent/pest issues. Meat scraps, oils and bones could attract rats, cats, skunks and other animals. When adding food scraps like bread products to your pile, it's best to add in moderation and bury them in your heap to help reduce unwanted attention from pests. A complete list of what should and should not be composted in home composting systems is below. Before you get started on your composting, make sure you've followed [these helpful tips from Save the Food](#) to reduce the amount of food that gets wasted.

✓ YES, COMPOST THESE AT HOME

- Cardboard (uncoated, small pieces)
- Coffee grounds and filters
- Eggshells
- Fireplace ash (from natural wood only)
- Fruits and vegetables
- Grass clippings
- Hair and fur
- Hay and straw
- House plants
- Leaves
- Newspaper (shredded)
- Nutshells
- Paper (uncoated, small pieces)
- Sawdust
- Teabags
- Wood chips
- Yard trimmings

✗ NO, DO NOT COMPOST THESE AT HOME

- Coal or charcoal ash (might contain substances harmful to plants)
- Dairy products and eggs (create odor problems and attract pests such as rodents and flies)
- Diseased or insect-ridden plants (diseases or insects might survive and be transferred to other plants)
- Fats, grease, lards, oils (create odor problems and attract pests such as rodents and flies)
- Meat or fish bones and scraps (create odor problems, attract pests such as rodents and flies, and might also carry pathogens)
- Pet feces or litter (might contain parasites, bacteria, germs, pathogens, and viruses harmful to humans)
- Yard trimmings treated with chemical pesticides (might kill beneficial composting organisms)

Let it ROT

Worried about care and maintenance? That's easy, too. In the summer, use a shovel or old garden fork to turn the pile once a week; in the winter, once every three or four weeks is fine. After each layer, you can sprinkle some soil from your yard/garden to add beneficial organisms, plus a little water to wash the organisms into the pile. How do you know if your pile needs water? Simply grab a handful of the pile; it should feel about as damp as a wrung-out sponge.

Use Your Dirt Wisely

Over a few weeks, those food scraps and shredded leaves will morph into soil-like dark matter. The compost is complete when it has a musty, earthy smell and you can't recognize any of the items you dropped in. If you have a garden, sprinkle the compost around plants, mix it in with potting soil, or use it as a top dressing for your lawn. If you live in a city, you may see composting as a really good way to get stuck with a giant tub of dirt. Try to use your compost in houseplants—if it's really broken down, the compost can replace the need for soil. You can also share the bounty by offering a free donation to friends, coworkers, your children's school, or anyone else.

Spread The Word!

More and more local governments are recognizing that food waste is the bulk of what goes to their landfills and are starting to do something about it. About 3,560 community composting programs were documented by the EPA in 2013, and that number continues to grow. These larger-scale operations—often run in tandem with regular curbside garbage pickup—accept more types of food scraps than you can easily handle in the backyard. You can sometimes add meat, dairy, and compostable plastics for larger composting operations. We advise that you check to see if your city has a composting program, and if not, be an advocate: Let your local leaders know you'd like to see it happen.

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