

Home Composting

Composting, nature's own way of recycling, is the controlled decomposition of organic material such as leaves, twigs, grass clippings, and vegetable food waste. Compost is the soil amendment product that results from proper composting.

Whether it's done on site, at the point of waste generation or in a large-scale, centralized facility, composting helps to keep the high volume of organic material out of landfills and turns it into a useful product. On-site composting reduces the cost of hauling materials and is generally exempted from solid waste regulations. Large scale facilities can handle more material and potentially produce a more consistent product, but may be faced with regulatory issues.

Compost Helpers

If you are thinking about starting a compost pile in your back yard don't be surprised by the critters taking up residence in your pile. Don't panic! They belong there!

Compost Pile Critters

The process of decomposition is a very complex but natural one. There are many organisms that create the breakdown of organic matter. Most are not seen by the human eye, but they are there throughout the process. Others that are large enough to see are usually associated with the later breakdown stages.



Something Got You Bugged?

So you've been working on your compost pile for eight months and figure it's time to harvest and use some of that "good stuff" you've been making. So out you go to your compost bin and you find ... BUGS!!! What do you do now?

First, don't panic! Not all bugs are bad. In fact, all bugs play a role in nature. Many compost pile organisms eat other organisms and turn them into compost. At least one-third of the volume in a compost pile is made up of the dead, decomposed bodies of soil organisms.

Still, you don't want just any old bugs in your compost pile. So let's learn about what you might find in your compost pile so you'll be able to decide whether there really is a problem or not.

The Compost Food Web

If you are just trying composting for the first time, you may be surprised by the size and complexity of the community of small organisms that take up residence in your compost pile. These organisms, which include many insects, bugs, slugs, bacteria, and fungi, form what is called a "food web." In the food web, each organism has a job to do in turning your organic waste into dark, crumbly finished compost.

The food web decomposition process is divided into three levels:

Level One (primary consumers) is comprised of the organisms that shred organic matter and the microscopic organisms that eat the shredded organic residues.

Level Two (secondary consumers) is comprised of the organisms that eat level one organisms.

Level Three (tertiary consumers) is comprised of the organisms that eat level two organisms.

Maintaining the Balance

All members of the compost food web are very beneficial to your compost pile and should be left alone to do their work. They need each other to survive. If you remove any of the member organisms through the use of insecticides, you will interfere with their natural cycle as well as contaminate your compost with insecticide residues. While the organisms are busy recovering from the imbalance created in their food web, your compost pile will be decomposing much slower. On the other hand, if you are willing to closely monitor the temperature in your compost pile, you can speed up the process by gathering excess sow bugs, earwigs and slugs and adding them to your pile after it has cooled.

The "Great Escape" Issue

Home composters often fear that the hungry organisms in the compost pile may escape to the garden or lawn and eat everything in sight. Fortunately, this is not the case. The compost pile is their preferred environment. In fact, other organisms from the garden or lawn may leave their homes and go into the compost pile!

However, if you are concerned about the food web in your compost pile "breaking out," try the following tips:

Create a barrier by spreading a line of wood ash (not barbecue ash because of fat residues) or crushed egg shells around your compost pile. This will keep the activity contained within the pile.

A similar, but more lethal technique, is to sink small margarine containers full of stale beer, molasses and water, or yeast and water in the ground around the compost pile. Unsuspecting slugs, sow bugs, and earwigs will be attracted to the liquid, crawl inside, and drown. Of course, some bugs and insects may overpopulate parts of your garden. If this is the case, try the following solutions.

Solutions



Flies

Compost piles made entirely from yard trimmings do not usually attract flying insect pests in large numbers.

So if you have flies, particularly fruit flies, you're probably putting food waste too close to the surface in your pile or you are including meat or dairy products, or even animal manure. Flies can be greatly reduced by keeping meat, dairy, and manure out of the pile. Also, you should bury all the plant food waste in the centre of the pile and cover the top of the pile with a one-inch layer of soil, dry leaves, or finished compost. Ensure that the pile is not too damp or too acidic by maintaining a balance of materials. You could also compost your food waste in a worm bin or just bury them under 8- to 10-inches of soil.



Earwigs

If you discover earwigs on your plants, there are two solutions. Earwigs can be trapped in rolled up newspaper, old hose, or corrugated cardboard and shaken into the compost pile. Another solution would be to simply spray the offending earwigs with a solution of one tablespoon of liquid soap detergent combined with one quart of water. This will kill the earwigs that are doing damage and spare the helpful bugs that are eating dead organic material.

Other Ways To Reduce Organic Waste

In addition to composting, you can also help reduce organic waste by grasscycling (leaving grass clippings on the lawn when you mow) and vermicomposting (composting with worms).

Composting Techniques

Composting can be done "gourmet" style, requiring more effort, with quick results--or can be done more casually. Both ways will have a positive effect on the environment and produce usable compost. It just depends on how much time you want to spend with your compost pile and how fast you want the compost.

"Gourmet" compost piles that have the right blend of nitrogen (greens) and carbon (browns) and are kept moist and fluffed regularly, will heat up to temperatures of 120 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit. The high temperature will kill most weed seeds and speed up the decomposition process so that the compost may be ready in 2

to 3 months or less.

"Casual" compost piles are also quite workable since compost will "happen" even if you just pile on yard and food waste, water sporadically, and wait. The pile won't get as hot, so it won't decompose as quickly and may not kill weed seeds. Casual composting can take several months.

If you are thinking about starting a "casual" compost pile in your back yard, you may want to familiarize yourself with the critters taking up residence in your pile.

How to Tell When it's Done

Your compost is finished when the original material has been transformed into a uniform, dark brown, crumbly product with a pleasant, earthy aroma. There may be a few chunks of woody material left; these can be screened out and put back into a new pile.

You may want to stop adding to your compost pile after it gets to optimal size (see above) and start a new pile so that your first pile can finish decomposing (during which time the temperature will drop).

Information obtained from: www.ciwmb.ca.gov/

HOME COMPOSTING NATURE'S OWN WAY OF RECYCLING



**City of Camarillo
601 Carmen Drive
Camarillo, CA 93010
(805) 388-5392**

City Manager's Office
Solid Waste Division