



Monterey Regional Waste Management District

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www.keepmontereycountyclean.org

M O N T E R E Y R E G I O N A L



Guide to Home Composting

Using Your Finished Compost

Soil Amending

Dig in as much as 6" of compost into annual garden beds each year or into soil under and around new trees and shrubs before planting. As a soil amendment, compost reacts with soil to slowly release both plant nutrients and essential trace elements.

Mulching

To use compost as mulch to control weeds and hold moisture in the soil, spread compost 2-3" thick around plants, trees, shrubs, and exposed slopes, leaving 2-3" from base of plant.

Make Your Own Potting Mix

Screen finished compost to use only the fine particles. Mix with equal parts sand and soil.

This brochure was adapted from the Home Composting information published by CalRecycle at www.calrecycle.gov



Other Ways To Reduce Organic Waste

In addition to composting, you can help reduce organic waste by:

Grasscycling

Grass clippings make up a large portion of California's waste stream during the growing season.

Grasscycling is an effective way of recycling clippings. Grass clippings left on the lawn decompose quickly and release valuable nutrients back into the soil. To grasscycle follow the "1/3 rule": mow often enough so that no more than 1/3 of the grass blade is cut in one mowing.



Vermicomposting

For those who don't have a yard, or energy to do "backyard composting," vermicomposting may be an option. Vermicomposting is the practice of using earthworms in a contained space to make compost from food waste. Worm bins can be made or purchased. They can fit nicely under the kitchen sink, on a porch or in a garage. The resulting worm castings are full of beneficial microbes and nutrients, and add to the health of the soil and plants.



Resources

Internet Sites:

www.mrwmd.org
www.calrecycle.gov
www.omexchange.org
www.compost.css.cornell.edu/composting

Books:

The Complete Compost Gardening Guide, 2008. Barbara Pleasant & Deb Martin
Let It Rot! 1998. Stu Campbell
Worms Eat My Garbage, 1997. Mary Appelhof

MRWMD Compost Workshops:

Free Workshops are offered throughout the year. Check www.mrwmd.org for upcoming events.



Composting & Landscape Supplies:

MRWMD's Last Chance Mercantile carries compost bins, books and related supplies.

Purchase ready-to-use landscape supplies including:

Recycled-content woodchips (small, large, and various colors)
Locally produced compost, top soil and potting soil.

Material is sold by the bag or by the ton. See www.mrwmd.org for prices and more information.

About the Monterey Regional Waste Management District (MRWMD)

Established in 1951, the MRWMD's primary purpose is to manage the Monterey Peninsula region's solid waste. Today, the MRWMD is home of the award winning Last Chance Mercantile, Household Hazardous Waste Collection Facility, Recycling Drop-off, Materials Recovery Facility, Monterey Peninsula Landfill, and the Landfill Gas Renewable Energy Project. The MRWMD board of directors and employees thank you for doing your part to reduce waste and conserve resources.

Find us on Facebook. For more information call 831-384-5313 or visit www.mrwmd.org



Why Compost?

Composting is nature's way of recycling organic materials and returning nutrients to the soil. Over time, organic matter such as leaves, grass clippings, twigs, fruit and vegetable food waste biologically decompose into a dark, crumbly soil conditioner called compost. The practice of creating and maintaining a home compost pile accelerates this process.

Organic materials such as yard and food waste account for 33% of the waste generated in a typical Monterey County household. Composting this material is a great way to reduce waste. Using finished compost in your garden:

- Returns nutrients to the soil
- Improves water retention
- Helps improve soil structure

Whether you have trees and shrubs, a garden, or a few container plants, anything you grow will benefit from compost.



Getting Started

Compost bins or enclosures are a good way to contain your organic materials during the composting process, although you can also pile your material up in a "heap" if you have the space. The ideal compost enclosure or space will accommodate one cubic yard of volume.

Enclosures can be as simple as a wire mesh hoop or more elaborately constructed with wooden slats or reused pallets. Several commercially made bins may also be purchased and are available in a range of styles and sizes. Be sure to check out the Last Chance Mercantile at the Monterey Regional Waste Management District for low cost compost bins. Plans to build your own bin are available online at www.mrwmd.org.

Ingredients



How Compost Happens

While a multitude of organisms, fungi and bacteria are involved in the overall process, there are four basic ingredients for composting: nitrogen, carbon, water and oxygen. The easiest compost recipe calls for blending roughly equal parts of green or wet material (which is high in nitrogen) and brown or dry material (which is high in carbon). A variety of materials in a pile or enclosure, and add water as you go. Then leave it to the microorganisms to break down the material over time.



Green Materials

Nitrogen

Materials such as grass clippings and yard trimmings, food scraps, coffee grounds, and herbivore manure are all good sources of nitrogen. To reduce the potential for pests or odors, it is best to avoid meat or dairy scraps, bury food scraps deep within the compost pile, and avoid adding large quantities of fresh grass clippings or food waste at one time.



Brown Materials

Carbon

Dry yard and garden material such as leaves, twigs, straw and shredded newspaper can provide the carbon balance for a compost pile. Chop or shred large pieces to 12 inches or shorter (thick, woody branches should be chipped, ground up, or left out). Untreated wood chips and sawdust are a powerful carbon source which may be useful if the pile contains excess nitrogen. Along with providing carbon, these dry, brown materials are important in adding air space (oxygen) to your pile.

Oxygen

The organisms living and working in your compost system need oxygen. If your pile is too dense or becomes too wet, the air supply to the inside is cut off and the beneficial organisms die. Decomposition will slow and an offensive odor may arise. To avoid this and speed the process, aerate the pile by turning with a pitchfork often, perhaps weekly. One easy technique is to re-pile your material. Many composting bins make this easy to do by coming apart so you can easily re-pile the old pile back into the bin.



Water

One of the most common mistakes in composting is letting the pile get too dry. Your compost pile should be moist as a wrung-out sponge. When you water, it is best to put a hose into the pile so that you aren't just wetting the top. You can also water as you are turning the pile. During dry weather, you may have to add water regularly. During wet weather, you may need to cover your pile. A properly constructed compost pile will drain excess water and not become soggy.



Activators

Activators are ingredients that help get things going microbiologically, and expedite the natural decomposition process. A two-inch layer of healthy soil (loam), finished compost or aged farm manure added to every 6" to 12" of newly added organic matter, or a heavy sprinkling of a protein-rich meal such as bone meal or fish meal, added every 6" and wetted, all work well as activators.

Size

Ideally, the compost pile should be at least three feet wide by three feet deep by three feet tall (one cubic yard). This size provides enough food and insulation to keep the organisms thriving. However, piles can be larger or smaller and work just fine if managed well.



Got or need organic materials?

Do you have an over abundance of materials such as horse manure, wood shavings, or mulch? Or lack ingredients for your compost? The Organic Materials Exchange is a regional site where one can post or find organic materials for the garden. Visit the Exchange at: www.omexchange.org

Techniques & Troubleshooting

Composting Techniques

Composting can be done actively, requiring more effort with faster results, or can be done more casually. Both ways will have a positive effect on the environment and produce usable compost. Active or "hot" compost piles have a 30:1 ratio of carbon to nitrogen, or a blend of equal parts nitrogen (greens) and carbon (browns) with moisture and regular turning to promote rapid decomposition. During the active compost process it is common for temperatures in the pile to range between 110-150 degrees. A "hot" compost system can result in finished compost in 8 to 12 weeks. "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 6-12 months to produce finished compost.

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 of 1 cubic yard, and start a new pile so that your first pile can finish decomposing (during which time the temperature will drop). Give it a try! Home composting is best learned by doing. Through practice and observation you will find what works best for your home situation, and can modify the process to suit your needs. There are also a number of books written on backyard composting (see titles under "Resources"); check your local library or bookstore. Check www.mrwmind.org for information about workshops and low cost compost bins.

Troubleshooting

Symptom	Problem(s)	Solution(s)
The pile smells bad	Not enough air or too much moisture	Turn the pile if not enough air or Add dry materials if too moist
The pile will not heat up	Not enough moisture or Pile size is too small	Add water thoroughly if dry or Build pile to at least 3' x 3' x 3'
The pile attracts flies, rodents, or pets	Pile contains bones, meat, fatty or starchy foods, or animal manure	After materials added to pile, bury fruit/vegetable scraps in the middle of the pile, or under 8" to 10" inches of soil, or compost them in a worm bin.
Pile has slugs in it (and so does garden)	Pile is easily accessible and provides daytime hiding place and breeding ground for slugs	Remove slugs and slug eggs from pile (eggs look like very small clusters of clear pearls). Locate compost pile far from vegetable gardens and/or create barriers or traps around pile/garden.

