

McSHANE'S Backyard Composting

Composting is nature's way to recycle. It is the controlled natural decomposition of organic material, such as leaves, grass clippings, prunings, and fruit and vegetable scraps. Microorganisms break down these materials into compost or humus, the nutrient rich soil product that results from proper composting. Composting can be practiced almost anywhere ... in your backyard, at work or school, even if you live in an apartment. All you need to get started composting is a little bit of space, a bin, and a basic understanding of the composting process. The purpose of this flyer is to help you get started.

Getting Started Space

Your compost pile will need an area about 3 foot square. Vermicomposting uses less space, and is better suited for apartment residents and small yards. The pile should be located in a partially shady spot, so that the sun doesn't dry out your compost too quickly. You may want to plan for extra space around your pile to make turning and harvesting your compost easier.



Compost Bins

A compost bin will help to keep your compost pile neat and tidy, deter rodents from digging in your pile, and help your pile retain heat and moisture during composting. Compost bins can either be homemade or purchased from a bin manufacturing. Ideally, your compost bin should be at least 3 feet wide x 3 feet deep x 2 feet tall. Even if your bin is not this large, it will work just fine if managed properly. Take the time to consider your options and the style of composting that is most convenient for you.

Homemade Bins

These can be easily constructed out of wood, wire mesh, scrap pallets, or other materials commonly found in your home.



Manufactured Bins

These include turning units, cone-shaped bins, and bins with staking tiers. These bins can be purchased at nurseries and garden centers, or mail-ordered.

Composting Basics

Making compost is a lot like cooking a meal. You take some basic ingredients, add water, mix well

Ingredients

Four basic ingredients are required for composting: greens, browns, water, and air. Mixing the proper amounts of these ingredients together will provide the composting organisms (microbes and insects) with enough nitrogen, carbon, moisture, and oxygen to break down the material efficiently.

Greens include grass clippings, green leaves, fresh pruning, and fruit and vegetable scraps . Be sure not to add any meat or dairy products to your pile.

Browns consist of dry, woody materials such as dead leaves, wood chips, twigs, sawdust and paper. These materials are best added to the pile after being shredded or chopped, and help to "bulk-up" and aerate the compost pile.



Water is important in our climate . Your compost pile should be kept as moist as a wrung out sponge. Too little moisture will inhibit the composting process, and too much water can cause your pile to smell.

Air is essential for a sweet smelling compost pile. Turning your compost pile once or twice a week will inhibit the growth of odor-causing anaerobic bacteria, and result in faster composting .

Compost Critters

A handful of compost contains more decomposer organisms than there are people on the planet. These amazing little critters are responsible for making the whole composting process happen.

Microorganisms

Microorganisms (bacteria and fungi) are the main of the compost pile. Although too small to see, they are everything you throw into the compost pile.



Macroorganisms

(insects, worms, grubs) are big enough to see. They usually enter the compost pile from the surrounding landscape in the later stages of decomposition.

Composting in Style

There are several different styles of composting. Some require more time and effort, but yield quicker results. Make composting convenient for you by choosing the style that best fits your needs and schedule.

Active Composting

This involves turning the pile on a regular basis and maintaining proper moisture and temperature levels. Some bins, such as stacking tiers and turning units are designed to make turning and maintaining the pile easier.

When using the active method, it is best to start with a full compost bin. This provides enough organic material to insulate the pile and keep the microbes working hard.

You may want to stockpile some materials until you have enough to build a full pile. As you build the pile, layer your greens and browns and add water. Turn your pile at least once a week and add water if needed. Your compost should be kept moist but not soggy. If your pile is too wet, add shredded newspaper or leave the lid off your bin until excess moisture is dried up.

During the first few weeks of the composting process, the pile will heat up to temperatures of 20 to 150 degrees, helping to speed decomposition and kill any plant diseases and weed seeds. Your compost will be almost ready when it fails to heat up after turning it and let it "cure" for two or three weeks. Finished compost can be ready to harvest in as little as 12 weeks.

Passive Composting

Is less labor intensive than active composting, but it takes longer. Generally, passive composting is done by adding green and brown materials as they're generated, rather than starting with a full bin. You also turn and add water to the pile less frequently, about once a month. The pile won't get as hot and it may dry out at times, so it won't decompose as quickly and may not kill any weed seeds. But compost will "happen" in about 6 to 18 months. Bins with doors near the bottom are designed to make harvesting the finished compost easier.

Vermicomposting, or composting with earthworms, is a fun and easy way to recycle your food scraps. It takes up less space than regular composting, and can work in an apartment setting. Red wiggler earthworms are voracious eaters, consuming up to half their body weight in organic material every day. These worms are different than the large night crawlers commonly found burrowing in backyards. Red worms are smaller and process organic materials at the surface of the soil, excreting it in the form of castings, a nutrient rich fertilizer that plants love.



To get started you need to purchase or make a bin specifically designed from vermi composting. These bins generally are 10" to 15" deep, have a tight-fitting lid and holes drilled in the bottom for drainage and ventilation. Some designs come with catch basins for collecting "worm tea," the natural liquid fertilizer that is a by-product of the vermicomposting process.

Next, make a "bed" for your worms. Worms like to live under lots of moist paper or leaves. You can create a moist bedding for your worms by tearing strips of newspaper and soaking them in water, wringing them out and placing them in the bin. Add your worms and a handful of food scraps to the bedding, burying them underneath the newspaper. Feed your worms slowly at first, about a handful of fruit and vegetable food scraps each day. **NO MEAT, OILS, OR DAIRY PRODUCTS SHOULD BE PLACED IN THE WORM BIN.** Gradually increase the amount of food scraps you give your worms. Bury the food in different areas around the bin, so that you don't disturb the worms where their feeding.

Your Vermi compost will be ready to harvest in about three to four months. To separate your worms from castings, place food in on half of the bin only. Most of the worms will migrate toward the food, leaving the other half of the bin full of worm-free castings. Start the process over by adding fresh bedding to the side of the bin that was just harvested.

Grasscycling

Grass cycling is a quick and easy way to recycle your grass clippings and fertilize your lawn at the same time . It saves time and money , reduces the need fro frequent watering and chemical fertilizers, and promotes healthy lawn growth. Grass cycling is simple: just take the bag off your mower and leave the grass clippings on the lawn. The nitrogen rich clippings decompose quickly , adding nutrients to the soil and helping your lawn retain water.

Mow your lawn on a regular basis and when the grass is dry, keep that clippings short and make sure they don't form clumps. Mowing once a week during the summer and every 10 to 14 days during winter should be sufficient. You can also use a mulching mower, whose special blades chop the grass into smaller pieces. **DON'T WORRY**, grass cycling does not cause thatch . Clippings are make up of mostly water and nitrogen, and will dissolve quickly into the soil.



Mulching

Mulch is different from compost in the way that the materials are processed and used. While compost is fully decomposed material that can be used as a soil amendment, mulch is un-composted material that is spread over the surface of the soil as a ground cover.

Using mulch has many benefits: It prevents soil erosion, reduces the evaporation of water from the soil, and inhibits weed growth. It has even been shown to reduce the incidence of certain plant diseases . The best way to apply muchl is to spread a layer approximately 3-inches thick around the base of plants and on bare soil. Take care to keep the mulch from touching the base of plant stems or trunks.

Mulch can be made at home with the use of a power chipper. If you have a large yard , you may want to consider purchasing one, otherwise, chippers can be rented on an as needed basis. Ready to use mulch is also available at McShane's Nursery and Landscape Supply in a wide variety.