



Urban Gardening in Oak Park

Composting Tips for Homeowners

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Around this time of year, as homeowners start to clean up their lawns and gardens for the coming season, we often wonder what to do with all of our yard trimmings. People often want to know how to avoid the costs and hassles of stuffing their yard trimmings into “C-Bags” and brush bundles.

Each year Oak Park homeowners send hundreds of tons of lawn clippings, leaves, and shrub cuttings out to far-away composting yards by having them collected by sanitation crews. The money we spend on compost bags and brush stickers pays for the labor and equipment needed to go up each street and alley in Oak Park collecting our yard trimmings; for the gasoline used in hauling our stuff some thirty miles out to a municipal compost facility; and for the people and machines that grind, mix, spread, and sift the materials into finished compost.

With just a little planning, we can compost most materials at home to save on those sticker costs while creating a dark, rich material to nourish our own gardens.

What is compost? If you take a walk in the woods and look down at the layer of leaves and branches scattered on the ground, you are looking at compost in the making. Compost is simply organic material that is breaking down to again become part of the soil. Adding compost to our own gardens adds some nutrients but really helps the structure of the soil – loosens it up so the soil drains better in rainy periods and holds water better in dry periods.

People who want to start composting usually have three big questions before they begin:

- *Is it smelly?*
- *Doesn't composting attract pests?*
- *Is it hard work?*

The answer to the first two questions is no, as long as you make some important but easily avoidable mistakes. As for the third question, composting can involve as much or as little effort as you want.

To make your own compost, you don't really have to do much of anything. You simply pile all your yard trimmings into a corner and eventually have compost for your garden. But, there are some tricks to speed up the process to create a good home for the soil microbes that break down your yard trimmings into the deep-brown, crumbly compost you will like to use.

PILE THEM UP You can buy compost bins of many styles from hardware stores or mail-order catalogs, or make your own bin out of wood, wire mesh, or anything else available. There are dozens of styles for sale, and most do a fine job of keeping the materials in one place. For best results, open piles should be made at least 3ft x 3ft x 3ft to help hold in heat and moisture.

MIX THEM UP Mixing “browns” (fallen leaves, dry plants, straw) with “greens” (grass clippings, green plants and leaves) provides a good balance of nutrients, mainly carbon and nitrogen, for the composting process. A mix of all “browns” breaks down very slowly, and all “greens” like grass clippings can become smelly and messy. Grass clip-

A few “nevers”

No meat, bones, dairy foods, or oils (they get smelly, attract critters, and are very slow to break down).

No pet poop (horse manure is great, but waste from dogs or cats can harbor diseases).

No charcoal ashes or sawdust from treated lumber: petrochemicals = bad for compost.

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pings are best left on the lawn in the first place; they do not cause thatch buildup.

CHOP THEM UP Chopping or mowing over leaves, twigs, and big weeds shreds the materials into “bite-sized” pieces, to expose more surface area for the tiny soil organisms to feed on.

KEEP IT MOIST A pile that is dry or very wet will break down only slowly. Spray the pile in very dry periods, or buy an enclosed bin which keeps enough moisture in (and excess rain out). Experts say it’s best when the compost is as moist “as a wrung-out sponge.”

GIVE IT AIR Turning the pile, or at least fluffing it up a few times with a garden fork or shovel, will let oxygen get to the soil microbes, and will mix the more broken-down materials with the fresher stuff from the pile edges. Some compost bins and “tumblers” are now on the market that promise to do away with the need to do much hand mixing.

KEEP SOME THINGS OUT Don’t put in meats, oils, and dairy foods. They take a long time to break down, they get smelly, and can attract rodents and other critters, especially in the urban environment we live in. Don’t put in pet waste, which can contain disease pathogens. (Horse manure, on the other hand, is great for compost if you can get it.)

RELAX The above are suggestions to make compost faster – ideally in three to four months. But don’t worry about composting The Right Way. Just find out what works for you and give it a try!

LEARN MORE Oak Park Village Hall has a very good free pamphlet on the basics of composting, and bookstores and garden centers sell several good, cheap books on the topic. Also, stay tuned to the Village’s environment web site at www.oak-park.us/environment for latest urban gardening news and tips.

The Impatient Composter Asks: How can I get the best compost the fastest?



or...“Which way	is better than which?”
Chopping materials up	is better than not chopping
Mix “browns” & “greens”	is better than all of one kind
Anything	is better than all grass clippings
A pile 3 to 5 feet wide	is better than smaller or larger
Turning the pile a few times	is better than not turning
Keeping the pile “damp”	is better than drier or wetter
But composting any way	is better than not!

Details...for the impatient composter

Chopping leaves, twigs, and big weeds, or running them over with your lawn mower, shreds the materials into more “bite-sized” pieces for the tiny microbes in your compost pile to feed on.

Mixing brown materials (fallen leaves, dry weeds, straw) with green materials (grass clippings, green weeds and leaves) provides a good balance of nutrients, mainly carbon and nitrogen, for the compost microbes.

Grass clippings, piled up by themselves, can soon turn goey and

smelly. It’s better if you mix them with other materials in your pile, spread them thinly on your garden as a mulch, or (best!) leave them on your lawn. Grass clippings left on your lawn do not cause thatch buildup!

A pile 3 to 5 feet on a side is a good size. Any smaller, and the pile has trouble retaining heat and moisture. In piles bigger than about 5 feet on a side, it’s hard for the organisms in the center to get the air they need to do their job of composting your materials.

Turning or fluffing up the pile a time or two lets air get in throughout the whole pile, and mixes any pockets of finished compost with fresh materials.

Watering a pile as you build it and during very dry periods makes sure it doesn’t dry out, which pretty much stops the composting action. You can buy all kinds of enclosed compost bins, which can keep enough moisture in. A pile is going to work best when it is “as moist as a wrung-out sponge.”