

## Composting basics

*Source: Rick Durham, extension professor*

Composting is a great way to add valuable organic matter to your soil while reducing the amount of yard and food waste that ends up in landfills. It's also something that nearly everyone can do.

Compost is the result of a natural process where decaying organic substances, such as plants, are broken down by microorganisms. This produces a nutrient-rich, organic material that you can apply to your lawn or garden, much like you would a commercial fertilizer.

You can start a compost bin or pile in your backyard. You can purchase a bin or make one using inexpensive, leftover materials like pallets or chicken wire. The bin can be as big or small as you want, but for most rapid composting, a pile that is at least 1-yard tall and 1-yard wide and 1-yard long is best. Make sure you place your compost in an area that is flat and well-drained.

Once you have defined a compost area, collect yard waste and food scraps. Yard waste includes twigs, shrub trimmings, grass clippings, leftover straw and leaves. Most fruit, vegetable and grain scraps are compostable as are coffee grounds, herbs, nuts and egg shells. Avoid meat scraps, oils and dairy products. Remember, you need to have a mixture of "brown" material (dried leaves, straw, twigs, coffee grounds, even cardboard) and "green" materials (fresh grass clippings, vegetable scraps, other fresh plant materials) for the composting process to work. Mix or turn the pile once a week to help speed the breakdown of organic materials. If the compost pile is extremely damp, turn it more often. If it is dry, add some water or fresh plant material. It can take four to six months to complete the composting process. You will know it's finished when the compost is dark brown, crumbly and smells like soil.

Compost can be used in the vegetable garden or spread around ornamental plants in the landscape, but be careful not to use too much. A 1-inch layer of compost, worked into the top few inches of soil, will feed plants for several months.

More information on composting or other gardening tips is available at the Whitley County office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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