

# Compost Happens! ...in your backyard

*by Margot Monson*

## Building your own compost bins

No matter the construction material, aeration is important

**Size:** at least 3' cube, reaches critical mass as far as generating temperatures for decomposition  
3 bins preferable, for ease in turning the pile

### Wood vs wire mesh:

- Wire mesh provides more aeration but dries out faster.
- Pine lasts 3-4 yrs (treated wood may leach creosote, chromium, copper or arsenic)
- Cedar lasts 15 yrs+ with replacement of a few front slats
- 4 X 4 posts, 1 X 6 side pieces – lighter weight wood will end up decomposing
- Removable front side makes for ease in turning the pile

## Managing your compost pile

### Aeration:

- Micro organisms need O<sub>2</sub> for decomposition
- Turning at least once every 3-4 weeks produces finished compost in one year, helps in control of odors, reducing compaction, and assists oxygenation
- Turning infrequently takes longer to produce finished compost

### Compost materials:

- Alternate between about 50% green & 50% brown; err on side of more brown

**Brown:** dried leaves, stems, straw, brown paper towels

**Green:** any green yard/garden material, as well as kitchen vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, egg shells, tea bags,

- The smaller the pieces, the faster the decomposition
- Small amount of wood ashes, a very thin layer, adds potassium; **do not use coal ash or charcoal**
- Large animal waste is O.K. **but no dog or cat waste, nor human waste (other than urine which will increase the Nitrogen/mineral level, if so inclined)**

**Moisture:** a handful of compost should feel like a damp sponge; add kitchen waste water when necessary; also, when adding dry leaves in the fall, best to add water, or they will remain dry in the center of the pile until next Spring

### Odor control:

- When adding material to the pile, cover with a small amount of compost from the pile – keep pitchfork handy!
- Too much green material (Nitrogen), may add to odor problems, but regular monthly turning will keep most compost odors under control, if you have a good balance between brown and green

**Woody material:** it is hard to avoid some sticks, and they do aid in aeration by creating spaces. We sift out larger pieces before adding finished compost to garden, using a screen fitted over a wheelbarrow.

### **Home Vermicomposting System or Worm Box**

- A good alternative for small amounts of kitchen scraps, if no space is available for backyard compost
- Dig hole for small amounts of kitchen scraps, cover with soil; rotate holes; avoid raw pieces of potato & various seeds - may sprout
- Moisture and drainage important: a handful of worm soil should feel damp; place drainage holes in bottom of container and place it in shallow container to catch moisture.
- Keep loosely covered in shady place or indoors; will not survive temperatures much below 50<sup>0</sup> F.
- If mold appears, loosen cover to provide more ventilation, gently stir contents from bottom to top.
- Small insects and other invertebrates will occur as a part of the natural processes of decomposition; have not been a problem for me when kept in basement during the winter, but do not store other unrefrigerated fruits or vegetables in same room

### **References**

Appelhof, Mary. Worms eat my garbage: how to set up and maintain a worm composting system. Flower Press, 2006.

Foster, Clare. Compost. London: Cassell Illustrated, Octopus Publishing Group, 2005.