



## Celebrate International Compost Awareness Week – Start a Compost Pile!

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The week of May 3 to 9 heralds International Compost Awareness Week. This trying time has seen a rapid rise in home cooking as well as folks wanting to start backyard vegetable gardens. That makes this the perfect time to start composting as well since there will be plenty of food scraps and garden wastes to start your pile.

Composting is simply promoting the decomposition of organic materials by providing conditions that encourage biological activity. These include a space to locate the pile, air, moisture and a suitable mix of feedstocks (i.e. materials to be composted).

Why compost? Adding compost to your garden soil supplies multiple benefits. Both the amount of water and nutrients a soil can hold is increased. Compost is full of nutrients so less commercial fertilizer will need to be purchased. It also increases the amount of organic matter in your soil providing a great habitat for beneficial microbes and others, improves a soil's drainage and it is a great way to recycle food scraps and garden debris.

Creating a compost pile can be as easy as you want it to be. Sure a fancy composter can be purchased or built but just delegating a 3 by 3 foot or 4 by 4 foot spot next to the garden is fine too. Corral your compost using some fencing, logs or cinderblocks if desired.

A key component to successful composting is balancing feedstocks high in nitrogen, like vegetable scraps, garden wastes or chicken manure with those high in carbon, like fallen leaves, straw or shredded paper. Unless you happen to still have a pile of fall leaves or a bag of shredded paper, plan on purchasing a bale of straw or mulch hay or even wood shavings to get you through until leaves can be collected this fall.

Along with vegetable and fruit scraps, toss tea bags, egg shells and coffee grounds (along with the filter) into the compost pile. As you clean your garden beds this spring, add any chopped up perennial stems, old leaves and even weeds to the pile. Young weeds can be left in the sun for a day or two to kill them before adding to the compost pile. Older weeds, like established

dandelions with their taproots or quackgrass with long creeping stolons could take root in the pile so cut the roots off and toss the green parts in the pile.



Whenever you add a layer of ‘green’ material to the pile, cover it with a thin layer of ‘brown’ material like your leaves or straw or wood shavings. This is to balance the amount of nitrogen with carbon to encourage decomposition. Materials high in nitrogen, like food scraps, tend to be heavy and wet. Without mixing in some feedstocks, higher in carbon and lighter and fluffier, so to speak, your pile becomes too dense, oxygen is pushed out and an unpleasant odor can develop. Often new composters have to play around a bit with the ingredients on hand to come up with a good mix.

In an ideal situation, one would have correct proportions of brown and green materials to make up a 4 feet by 4 feet by 4 feet ‘hot’ compost pile which would heat up to 130 degrees F or so. It is difficult to get enough feedstocks at the beginning of the gardening season so be happy with a slower, ‘cold’ compost pile with what you have available now. As another layer or two is added, turn the pile with a pitchfork to mix the materials together. Do your best to chop up any materials before adding them to the pile. Smaller sized particles will decompose much quicker than larger sized ones.

Once the pile gets a couple of feet or so high, stop adding new materials but continue to turn. This will increase the amount of oxygen going into the pile, which the microbes require for decomposition. During the hot summer months, if the pile seems on the dry side, moisten it.

When the original materials are for the most part not discernable, the compost is typically ready to use. Spread about ½ to 1 inch over garden beds as you clean them up in the fall. Keep in mind, some composts can be high in nutrients so do not overapply. Consider having your compost amended soil tested every few years to see where the nutrient and soil pH levels are.

Come fall with its copious amounts of leaves, be sure to put them to good use creating another compost pile and save some for use next summer. Compost is a wonderful way to recycle organic materials while at the same time providing a wonderful amendment to garden soils.

If you have questions about composting or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

