SAVE MORE THAN FOOD

TROUBLESHOOT BACKYARD COMPOSTING

This simple troubleshooting guide provides solutions to some of the most common challenges that you may face with your compost pile to help you create the right conditions for healthy compost.

A trouble-free compost pile requires a balance of four things: carbon (browns), nitrogen (greens), moisture, and oxygen. An imbalance of these components can cause problems. Finished compost is dark and crumbly and has an earthy smell. In its final state, you should no longer be able to identify the individual materials that were added.

Problem: Too wet or slimy. A composting pile can become too wet if it is exposed to rainfall, or if too many kitchen scraps or water is added. Excess moisture compacts materials, which limits airflow and creates an anaerobic (without oxygen) environment, resulting in a smelly pile.

Solution: Add more carbon (dry browns); try a combo of carbon sources like leaves, twigs, cardboard, and straw, and mix the pile well. Material should be moist like a wrung-out sponge. If you squeeze a handful and water readily comes out, add more carbon.

Problem: Bad smell. If composting materials smell rotten and flies are hanging around, there is likely too much nitrogen-rich materials in it, such as kitchen scraps or grass clippings. Too much nitrogen will sometimes emit an ammonia smell.

Solution: Add more and coarser pieces of carbon; like ripped up cardboard, straw, and coarse saw dust to dry up and better aerate the pile. Break up large clumps to help promote airflow.

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FROM WASTE TO RESOURCES

Problem: Not breaking down.
One or more of the four components of composting isn't present in the right proportion. Possible culprits:

- Pile too small, not hot enough heat
- Not enough/too much water
- Not enough/too much air
- Not enough/too many browns or greens
- Browns and greens not mixed evenly

Solution(s):

- Increase the size of the piles. A minimum size of 3'x3'x3' is recommended to reach internal temps of 140° and above
- Adjust moisture
- Adjust browns to alter aeration
- Adjust amount of greens/browns
- Mix to more evenly distribute greens and browns
- Refer to other problem and solutions

Problem: Flies and gnats.
Millipedes and pillbugs are a sign of a healthy compost system. But if there is too much nitrogen – like food scraps – in your bin, and not enough carbon, other insects may invade.

Solution: Add more browns, especially on top of food scraps.
Mix food scraps deep into the pile and cover with a layer of browns. This will keep gnats and flies from laying eggs in the food scraps.

Problem: Rodents are getting in. Rodents are attracted to the food in composting piles. In cold weather, rodents also seek the warmth of actively composting piles which can be warmer than 150° F.

Solution: Avoid adding meats, cheese, greasy foods, and oils to your pile and ensure bins are completely enclosed. Rodents are typically not attracted to fruit and vegetable scraps but for good measure, mix scraps deep into the center of the pile and cover with a thick layer of browns. If composting in an enclosure, make sure your compost bin has no way of entry. Install mesh screen anywhere rodents may enter such as on the bottom of a bin that sits directly on the soil.

TIPS FOR PROBLEM-FREE COMPOST

- Add three times as many browns as greens for a well balanced compost pile. Keep browns on hand so that you're adding browns and greens at the same time and topping with browns to keep flies off your pile. Turn your pile once a week to distribute browns and greens evenly throughout the pile.
- Don't put meat, dairy, greasy foods, or pet waste into your compost. These items will attract rodents.
- If primarily composting kitchen scraps, maintain a stash of browns to add to your pile every time you add scraps. Common carbon sources include cardboard, shredded paper, leaves, paper towels, straw, wood chips, and twigs.
- Weed seeds will remain visible unless a compost pile gets really hot. Since home compost piles usually don't reach the highest temperatures, leave out the weeds from your pile if you intend to use your compost in the garden.
- Use a variety of browns, so that your pile is full of channels that allow air to circulate and excess moisture to drain away. A single type of brown, like sawdust, can more easily compress into a dense layer and lead to excess wetness.
- Chopping or shredding materials before adding to the compost pile promotes faster decomposition.
- Certain larger items, such as corn cobs or egg shells, will take longer to decompose if they are not broken down into small pieces.