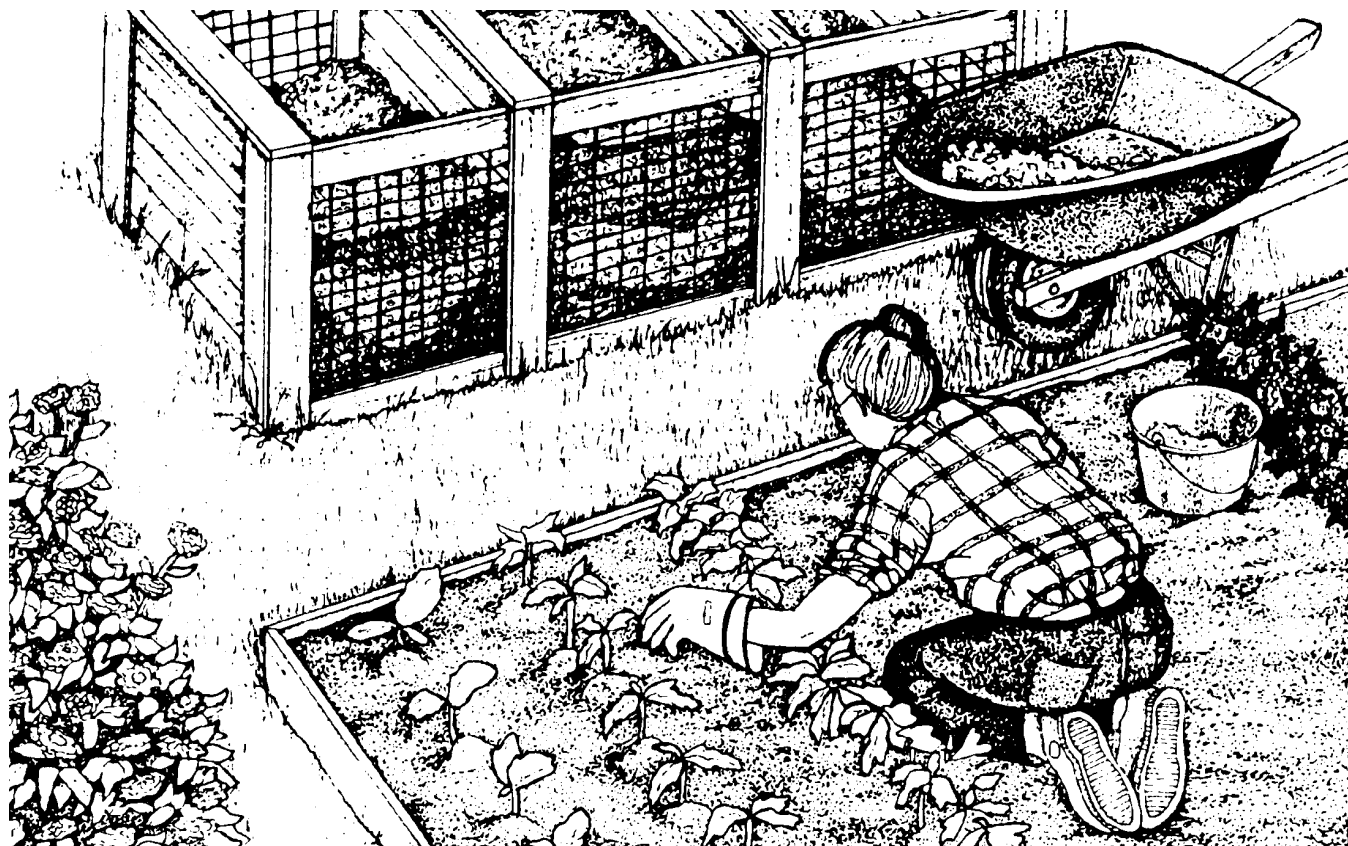


# Composting Yard Wastes



The Vermont and New York Master Gardener Programs, supported by the University of Vermont and Cornell Extension and Lake Champlain Sea Grant, support the objectives of the Lake Champlain Management Plan and Basin Program. This factsheet is intended to help prevent or reduce pollution coming from residences within the Lake Champlain Basin.



## A valuable resource

Gardening creates wastes (vegetable garden debris, leaves, twigs and branches, etc.) that can be converted by composting into a valuable resource.

## Keep yard wastes out of Lake Champlain

Dumping of these valuable and recyclable materials in Lake Champlain or a river, lake, stream, or storm drain adds unneeded nutrients and degrades water quality, endangering water resources, the plants and animals associated with the water systems, as well as our own fresh water supply.

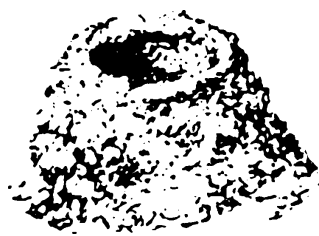
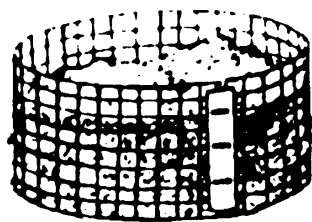
## Using yard wastes

### Mulching

Yard wastes such as leaves and wood chips can be used as mulch. Mulching the surface soil of your garden will conserve water, moderate soil temperature, and reduce weed growth. Eventually, nutrients within the mulch will be released, and the decomposed organic matter will improve soil structure. However, sawdust and wood chips should not be added directly to soil because they are high in carbon and will tie up soil nitrogen needed by plants. Grass clippings are best left on the lawn to recycle their plant nutrients directly back into the growing grass, reducing the need for fertilizer. Improved recycling lawnmowers are available to assist this process. Clippings do not contribute to thatch problems.

## Composting

Compost, the end product of organic decomposition, can be used to improve the soil. Compost can loosen heavy clay soils by improving soil structure. This improves aeration and water infiltration. In sandy soils, water and nutrient-holding ability will be increased (1 pound of organic matter can hold up to 7 pounds of water). The organic matter and its microbial populations will increase the soil's ability to hold and break down certain groups of pesticides. Soils rich in organic matter also provide a favorable environment for many beneficial organisms, such as insects, worms, and microorganisms. Compost should be completely decomposed when it is tilled into the soil prior to planting.



### What can be composted?

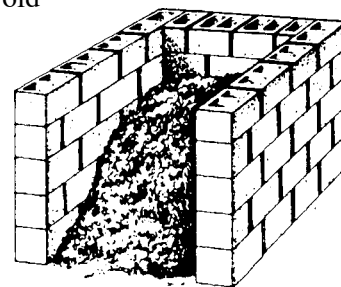
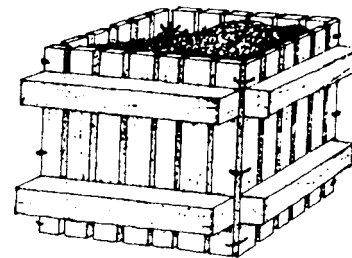
All organic materials (the wastes from living things) can be composted. Large pieces (twigs, branches, stalks, etc.) should be chipped or shredded to smaller pieces to speed up the breakdown process. Shredding

leaves is also a good idea; a rotary mower could be used for this.

While the **lake-friendly gardening** approach avoids the use of garden chemicals, any chemically treated grass clippings or yard wastes must be composted until completely decomposed (for several months) to eliminate potential pesticide or herbicide residue problems.

Diseased plant parts, perennial weed propagules (such as seeds or rhizomes), and weeds with seeds should not be placed in a compost pile. A large pile of properly managed decomposing biomass can provide high enough temperatures to kill many types of disease organisms and weed seeds, but it is better to avoid adding problem materials.

A properly maintained compost pile will be odorless and free of pests and rodents, as long as it is aerobic and undesirable materials (such as fats and meats) are not added.



### Master Gardener Program

**University of Vermont Extension:** (800) 639-2230; [pss.uvm.edu/mg/](http://pss.uvm.edu/mg/)  
Burlington area: (802) 656-5421

**Cornell Cooperative Extension:** Clinton County: (518) 561-7450; Essex County: (518) 962-4810

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