

What is compost?

Compost is decomposed organic matter that helps build healthy soil by stimulating and feeding the many beneficial soil microorganisms. Along with adding nutrients, compost helps soil hold water (and nutrients) and air. Compost works on any soil; it helps sandy soils hold nutrients and water, and it loosens clay soils.



Where to get compost

You can make compost at home, or buy it in bags or bulk. Leaves, chopped stalks, flowers, grass and vegetable kitchen scraps all make great compost in a pile or bin – just keep the pile moist, make sure there's enough air flow, and wait a few months. In an urban or suburban area, food scraps should be composted in a rodent-resistant compost bin or a worm bin to prevent pest problems.

Brown materials	Green materials
Paper, cardboard, paper rolls	Wet yard waste like fresh grass clippings, green leaves, and soft garden prunings.
Dry yard waste like dry leaves, small branches, and twigs, straw, sawdust, used potting soil	Food scraps like vegetable and fruit peels, coffee grounds, and tea bags.

More information about how to make your own compost can be found at urbanext.illinois.edu/homecompost/

Lawn to Lake is a collaborative program to protect water resources in the Great Lakes region by promoting healthy lawn and landscape practices. With funding from the U.S. EPA Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), partners are coordinating a pollution prevention campaign addressing the needs of those responsible for lawn and landscape care in the Southern Lake Michigan basin. Collaborating partners include Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant (IISG), Lake Champlain Sea Grant, Safer Pest Control Project (SPCP), and University of



IISG-12-02



LCSG-12-04

Find us on:  

www.lawntogreatlakes.org

LAWN TO LAKE

Compost as a Fertilizer

Healthy soil contains many beneficial microorganisms that enhance plant growth. In fact, a teaspoonful of healthy soil contains about four billion organisms! Build this soil fertility by adding compost to garden beds and lawns.

MAKE YOUR OWN

Some people start with an easy pile, and then move to a bin when they're ready. You can give your pile some structure with chicken wire or snow fencing, or by nailing scrap wood together to make a four-sided box. Composting will not attract rodents as long as you keep meat, dairy, grease, grains and pet waste out, and be sure to use a rodent-resistant bin (with a lid, a floor and no holes or gaps larger than ¼ inch). Bins can be purchased from a retailer, and some communities provide residents free or discounted bins to encourage backyard composting.



When making compost, it is important to remember that a balance between carbon (brown material, like leaves), nitrogen (green material, like food scraps), air and water is needed. Too much nitrogen will attract too many insects and the pile will not break down into usable compost for plants. An easy ratio to remember is 4:1 – 4 parts carbon to 1 part nitrogen.

USING COMPOST

On garden beds and new turf

Dig or rototill in 1-3 inches of compost when you're making new beds or planting lawns in the spring and fall.

On existing lawns

With a rake, spread a thin layer of compost (up to 1/2 inch) onto grass to enhance nutrient supply, increase aeration and water holding capacity, and promote the development of beneficial soil organisms. It's best to do this in the spring and fall. Ideally, this should be done after aerating the lawn. Compost helps sandy soils hold nutrients and water, and loosens clay soils.



VERMICOMPOSTING

Putting Worms to Work

Vermicomposting or worm composting is an easy way to turn food wastes into a nutrient rich soil amendment. This method of composting is especially useful for families with little or no yard space. Worms are very efficient at breaking down food scraps. The equipment needed to vermicompost is minimal. You can purchase a premade vermicomposter or you can make one at home.

COMPOST TEA

Compost tea is a liquid fertilizer produced by diluting compost with water, using a ratio of one part compost to five parts water.

How to make it

Fill an old burlap sack with one part compost, and suspend this bag in a garbage can filled with five parts water (by volume) for several weeks. Proper aeration is needed, so make sure the sack has air flow around it.

Use on Garden Plants. Regular applications of compost tea throughout the growing season can improve tilth and aeration of depleted soils. Garden plants can benefit from direct soil application during the vigorous growth stage in early summer, flowering, and fruit set. This effect can be enhanced with periodic amendment of the soil with compost.

Use on Perennial shrubs and trees. Soak the ground with a watering in the spring, as well as, during vigorous early summer.

Use on Lawns. Grass can be sprayed with tea, either full strength or diluted 1:1, using a pump sprayer or a hose-end sprayer. The best time to apply it is when grass starts to green up in the spring and once a month throughout the growing season.