



Backyard Composting FAQs

What is backyard composting?

Backyard composting is a natural process that converts organic material, like food and yard waste, into a nutrient-rich product called compost. When we compost in our backyards, we create a natural environment where decomposer organisms, such as bacteria, insects, worms and fungi, can break down organic waste and recycle nutrients back into the soil.

How is composting good for the environment?

Organic waste accounts for 30% of the waste we generate in our province. Composting:

Reduces Waste Sent to Landfills – Less waste means less energy is used for collecting and transporting waste and less land is used for waste disposal.

Reduces Greenhouse Gas Emissions - Organics buried in a landfill break down very slowly and without the presence of oxygen. When this happens, methane gas, a potent greenhouse gas, is produced.

Reduces Pollution – The liquid from organic waste is picked up by rain and run-off water that filters down through the layers of a landfill and results in a liquid, known as leachate. Leachate can be toxic and may contaminate surrounding land, water and ground water.

Reduces the Need for Chemical Fertilizers and Pesticides - Finished compost is a rich, natural fertilizer that returns valuable nutrients back into the soil promoting the growth of healthy plants.

How can backyard composting help my community?

Since organic waste makes up 30% of the waste we send to landfills in Newfoundland and Labrador, composting can play an important role in solid waste management in your community. The less waste your municipality has to collect and transport, the lower waste disposal costs will be.

What can I compost?

You can compost organic waste from your home and garden. Organic waste includes food, yard and household waste items such as fruit and vegetable scraps, stale bread, peanut shells, tea bags, coffee grounds and filters, eggshells, paper towels, paper towel and toilet paper rolls, cereal and cracker boxes, paper, houseplant trimmings, leaves, small branches, grass clippings, etc.

Are there some organic materials I shouldn't compost?

Some organic materials should not be added to your backyard compost bin as they may cause problems such as odors, pests or unnecessary toxins. Avoid meat and fish products, bones, fat, oils and sauces, dairy products, weeds gone to seed, diseased plants, dog and cat waste, plants sprayed with pesticides, etc.

What are brown and green materials?

Brown materials are dry and fibrous and are a good source of carbon. Browns include dried leaves, shredded paper, and shredded cardboard. Green materials are fresh and moist and are a good source of nitrogen. Greens include food scraps, coffee grounds, tea bags, and fresh grass clippings. A compost pile works best with a good balance of carbon (browns) and nitrogen (greens).

Is backyard composting difficult or time consuming?

No, backyard composting is not difficult or time consuming - your job is simple. Add the material, occasionally turn the pile, and make sure the pile stays moist. It takes less than 5 minutes a day.

Do I have to be a gardener to compost?

No. Anyone, even non-gardeners and urban dwellers, can reduce their waste by backyard composting. All you need is a small, well-drained, sunny, accessible area to locate your bin. You can give any excess compost to a friend who gardens.

How do I get started with composting?

- Step 1:** Build or buy a compost bin.
- Step 2:** Choose a location outdoors that is sunny, easily accessible, and has good drainage.
- Step 3:** Collect organic kitchen waste indoors in a covered container. Add a balanced amount of brown and green material, ending with a layer of browns on top.
- Step 4:** Turn and mix the pile each time you add material.



How long does the composting process take?

Given our cooler climate and short growing season, the composting process in Newfoundland and Labrador can take up to one or two years. The amount of time it takes your compost pile to produce finished compost will depend on the material you add and the effort you put in. A compost pile that is turned often and receives the proper brown-to-green balance will decompose faster than a compost pile that is not maintained.

Do I need to purchase activators to add to my compost pile?

No. Although activators will help heat up your compost pile, which speeds up the composting process, they are not necessary. If you do want faster results, you can activate your compost pile with a few shovels of finished compost or garden soil.

How will I know when my compost is ready?

Finished compost, known as humus, is dark and crumbly and has an earthy smell. You'll know when your compost is ready when it takes this form and none of the original material is visible.

How does compost benefit my garden?

By using compost in your garden, you enrich the soil with organic matter - improving heat and moisture retention. Plus, you promote the growth of healthy, pest-resistant plants and lawns, reducing the need for chemical fertilizers, pesticides and excess watering.

What can I do with my finished compost?

Uses for finished compost:

- Dig compost into the soil of new garden beds and lawns.
- Mix with potting soil for use in potted house plants.
- Use as mulch around trees, shrubs and plants.
- Use as a conditioner to help aerate clay soils.
- Give some to a friend or gardener.
- Use as a top dressing on established flower beds, gardens and lawns.



Can I compost all year round?

Yes, you can compost year-round. Decomposition will slow down or stop in the winter, but it will start up again when the temperature rises. Harvest any finished compost from your bin in the fall to make room for material to be added throughout the winter. Also, collect and store fall leaves to be added to the compost pile in the spring to absorb excess moisture.

What should I do if my compost starts to smell bad?

If your compost pile has an unpleasant odor, it's not getting enough oxygen and/or it's too wet. To eliminate unpleasant odors:

- Add oxygen to the pile by turning it thoroughly.
- Mix in a few shovels of healthy garden soil.
- Absorb excess moisture by adding brown material (like dried leaves).



What should I do if my compost pile is not composting?

First, check the basics. Make sure you are turning the pile regularly, adding a balance of brown and green material, and that your bin is in a location where it receives some sunlight and had good drainage. If the material still isn't breaking down, try one or more of the following troubleshooting tips. If your compost pile is:

- Too wet - add more brown material (dried leaves or shredded paper) and turn the pile.
- Too dry - add water and/or more green material (food scraps or green grass clippings) and turn the pile.
- Not heating up - the pile could be too small; keep adding browns and greens to increase the volume of the pile. The pile could be too dry; sprinkle with water if necessary.

What can I do with all my grass clippings?

You can add fresh grass clippings to your compost pile, just be sure to balance the fresh green grass with brown material or add the grass only after it has turned brown. If you accumulate more grass clippings than your compost bin can accommodate, simply "compost" your grass clippings by leaving them right on your lawn. Cutting your lawn frequently and only cutting the top third of the grass blade lets you leave the clippings on the ground where they can return nutrients back into your lawn.

What can I do with all my leaves?

You can collect and store fall leaves to add to your bin throughout the year to maintain the proper balance of browns and greens. You should also store an extra bag or two of leaves to use in the spring to absorb excess moisture. If you still have leaves leftover, you can start a leaf mold where you store leaves in a bin or covered pile and allow them to break down slowly over a 1-3 year period.

Does composting attract pests?

Setting up a compost bin will not attract new pest populations to your property. If pests are currently a problem in your area, the following tips will help you set up and maintain a pest-free compost pile.

- Avoid adding meat, fish, bones, oils, fat, and dairy products.
- Locate your bin away from things that offer food or shelter for pests such as bird feeders, open water, wood piles, and thick shrubbery.
- Cover exposed food waste with a layer of brown material, this will also keep wasps and flies away.
- Keep your compost pile moist (like a wrung-out sponge). Pests are more inclined to nest in a dry compost pile.
- Place your bin at least 12 inches away from fences, decks, or buildings.
- Turn your compost pile regularly. A regularly disturbed pile is unattractive to pests.
- Harvest finished compost at the bottom of the bin; this will discourage nesting.
- Place galvanized wire mesh under your bin to prevent burrowing.

For more information on backyard composting, check out our website at mmsb.nl.ca or contact an MMSB Marketing and Public Education Officer:

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