



# Backyard Composting Guide

## WHAT IS COMPOSTING?

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

## STEP 1: CHOOSE A BIN

There are many compost bin options; the one you choose will depend on your needs. In a small, urban backyard, a standard plastic or wooden bin may be preferable whereas in a larger garden, more than one bin or a three-bin composter may be required to accommodate extra yard waste.

Build a compost bin with simple plans from [mmsb.nl.ca](http://mmsb.nl.ca) or purchase a compost bin from a hardware store or participating municipality.

## STEP 2: CHOOSE A LOCATION

### In Your Kitchen:

Place a small, covered container in your kitchen for collecting food scraps (organic waste). Reuse a bucket (e.g. ice cream container) or purchase a collection container from a hardware store.

The amount of organic waste you add to your container will determine how often it needs to be emptied. Once or twice a week is usually sufficient.

**Tip:** Adding the proper material and emptying your indoor container regularly will prevent odors.

**Tip:** Rinse the container each time it's emptied or line it with newspaper that can also go in the compost bin.

### In Your Backyard:

Don't hide your compost bin - display it proudly! Choose an area that is:

- Sunny - to absorb and retain heat;
- Has good drainage - important in the spring when the compost pile produces excess moisture; and
- Convenient and accessible - so that it can be easily accessed all year long.

**Tip:** Turn the soil in the location where the compost bin will be placed to allow for proper drainage and the movement of soil organisms.

## STEP 3: ADD ORGANIC WASTE

Organic waste can be found in your kitchen, garden and throughout your home. Organic waste is normally classified as either "green" (source of nitrogen) or "brown" (source of carbon).

When adding organic waste to the compost pile, it is important to maintain the proper brown-to-green (carbon-to-nitrogen) ratio. A good mix of material consists of about 50% browns and 50% greens (by volume). Each time you add green material, follow with an equal or slightly greater volume of brown material.

### Browns = Carbon

*Dry, absorbent, fibrous materials.  
An essential energy source for  
decomposer organisms.*

- Dried leaves
- Dried & untreated grass clippings
- Non-diseased plants
- Twigs & small branches
- Woodchips & sawdust (from untreated wood)
- Paper (newspaper, paper towels, toilet paper rolls & cereal boxes)
- Rice, oats & other grains
- Dried corn stalks
- Pasta (no sauces or oils)
- Peanut shells
- Bread & other baked goods

**Tip:** Each time you add green kitchen waste to the compost pile, cover with a layer of browns. This will maintain the brown-to-green ratio and keep flies and odors away.

**Tip:** Collect and store fall leaves in a covered container next to the compost bin, to be added to the pile in the spring to absorb excess moisture.



### Greens = Nitrogen

*Fresh, moist materials. Essential  
for the growth and reproduction  
of decomposer organisms.*

- Fruit & vegetable peels and scraps
- Crushed egg shells
- Coffee grounds & filters
- Tea bags & leaves
- Fresh grass clippings
- Houseplant trimmings

**Tip:** Cut material into smaller pieces to increase the surface area. This allows material to break down faster in the compost pile.

### Items to Avoid

Avoid adding the following items to the compost pile. Although these materials are organic, they may cause problems such as odors, pests or unnecessary toxins.

- All meat products
- Fish & shellfish
- Bones
- Fat, grease, oils & sauces
- All dairy products
- Weeds gone to seed
- Diseased plants
- Dog & cat waste
- Plants treated with pesticides
- Wood treated with chemicals
- Charcoal

## STEP 4: TURN THE PILE

Turning, or aerating, the compost pile allows oxygen to reach the center and bottom of the pile. To keep air circulating in your bin, turn your compost regularly.

**Tip:** Keep a shovel or a pitchfork next to your compost bin to remind you to turn the pile each time you add organic waste.

### Maintaining the Compost Pile:

Maintain the compost pile by maintaining an optimal environment for the decomposer organisms doing the work inside the pile. Provide what all living things need to survive: food, water and oxygen.



**Tip:** From time to time, visually check the moisture level of the compost pile or do a squeeze-test.

**Tip:** If the compost pile has an unpleasant odor, it is not getting enough oxygen. Turn the pile thoroughly to eliminate the odor.

### MAINTAINING:

#### Food

Continue adding a good balance of brown and green organic waste. Always finish with a layer of browns.

#### Water

The compost pile should be as moist as a wrung-out sponge. When you touch the pile it should feel damp; but when you squeeze it very little liquid should run out.

The compost pile gets most of the moisture it needs from green material. If it gets too wet add more brown material; if it gets too dry add more green material or sprinkle with water.

#### Oxygen

Turn the compost pile regularly to add oxygen. Turning the pile is very important because it gives decomposer organisms the oxygen they need to survive and convert your waste into compost.



## USING FINISHED COMPOST:

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

Given our cooler climate and short summer 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 be converted into humus 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 break down faster than a compost pile that is not maintained.

**Tip:** Continue to add organic waste to your bin as you harvest finished compost from the bottom or start a new compost pile while you allow the original pile to fully decompose.

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

### Uses for Finished Compost:

- Use as mulch around trees, shrubs and plants.
- Mix with potting soil for use in potted house plants.
- Dig compost into the soil of new garden beds.
- 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.



## Composting with the Seasons

You can continue to compost organic waste all year long, even during the winter months.

**In the fall...** Harvest any finished compost to make room for material to be added throughout the winter.

**In the winter...** Continue adding organic waste. Even if the pile freezes, decomposition will begin again when the temperature rises.

**In the spring...** Start turning the pile again to add oxygen and add brown material to absorb excess moisture.

**In the summer...** Maximize the productivity during the short summer season by turning the pile frequently and adding layers of browns and greens.

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

**Tel: 709.753.0948**  
**Toll-Free: 1.800.901.6672**  
**Email: [inquiries@mmsb.nl.ca](mailto:inquiries@mmsb.nl.ca)**