RETHINK WASTE: Backyard Composting

Composting at home is good for your garden and good for the earth. Approximately 35% of all household garbage in the US is organic waste that can be composted in your backyard. By composting your food scraps you can prevent waste and green-house gas emissions, have healthier plants, conserve water and use fewer chemicals in your yard and garden.

Composting is a way of harnessing the natural process of decomposition. In nature, all living things will eventually decompose, but composting can speed up the process to a few weeks or months. The result is a dark, nutrient rich, crumbly substance that benefits gardens and landscapes.

RETHINKWASTE
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Good For Your Garden & Good for the Earth

- Send less materials to the landfill.
- Save water by improving water holding capacity in soils.
- Reduce the need for chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides.
- "Close the loop" by taking waste and turning it into something valuable!
- Provide valuable nutrients to your soil and plants.
- Protect plants against disease.
- Promote weed and erosion control.
- Help protect roots from extreme temperatures.

Four Essentials

Just like all living things, the microorganisms in your compost need these four things to flourish:

AIR. Turn your pile every week or two to allow for lots of oxygen flow.

WATER. Water your compost enough so that it feels about like a wrung out sponge.

FOOD. The microorganisms in your compost need a good balanced diet of brown and green materials.

SPACE. A healthy compost pile is at least one cubic yard (3' x 3' x 3') in volume.

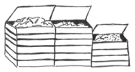
Using Compost

- Soil Amendment: Compost is a great soil amendment for your garden. Mix in two to six inches of compost each year before planting.
- Potting Soil: Add one part compost to two parts potting soil.
- Mulch: Use mature compost instead of bark dust or wood chips to hold in moisture and protect roots during the winter. Spread between two to six inches around plants and trees, careful to keep the compost away from the trunks of trees.
- Lawn Top Dressing: Sprinkle 1/8 to 1 inch of finely sifted compost evenly over the top of your lawn in the spring and the fall. This adds nutrients, help fight diseases, and may reduce the need to thatch and aerate.
- Compost Tea: Compost tea is a great nutritional "drink" to give to your plants. To make the tea, put 5 or 6 shovel-fulls of compost in a burlap bag. Submerge bag in a 50-gallon container and let steep for 2 to 3 days. Apply tea directly to the soil or around desired plants.

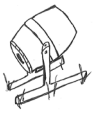
Types of Compost Piles and Bins

- Open pile. The most basic, but also the easiest to manipulate. Locate the pile in the shade in the summer, in the sun in the winter.

- One Bin Enclosed System. Usually store bought black plastic bins, these are easily moved, and scavenger resistant. They tend to hold in heat and moisture well.



- Multi-bin system. Easy to build with old pallets! Great for households that generate larger amounts of waste. This system allows for continuous stockpiling, while another batch may be already composting.



- Tumbler bin. The ease of turning your compost with this type of bin can produce a well-aerated, hot compost within a few weeks. Great for smaller amounts of waste.

- Wire Collector. A quick, inexpensive way to compost. Field fencing or rabbit wire works well. Like an open pile, be sure to check moisture levels as this may dry out often.

Learn more options for reducing waste in Deschutes County at:

RETHINKWASTEPROJECT.ORG

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10 Steps to Compost

1. Educate your household. Let everyone know about composting and why you have decided to compost. To get the most our of your compost, everyone should know the basics.

2. Decide on the type of compost pile. Depending on your household needs, one system might work better than another. For instance, if you have pets or other critters that might get into the compost, you might want to use a closed bin.

3. Collect your BROWN Materials. The microbes that live in a compost pile need carbon for energy. Plant materials with high carbon are usually brown in color such as: dry leaves, dry pine needles, straw, sawdust, and shredded paper. Shred into smaller pieces for best results.

4. Collect your GREEN Materials. The nitrogen found in green materials provides proteins for the microbes that live in a compost pile. Materials with high nitrogen levels are often green in color, such as fresh grass clippings and fruit and vegetable scraps. Chop into medium-sized pieces. Very fine material may restrict airflow and become "clumpy".

5. Mix the BROWNS and GREENS. A successful compost pile needs the right mixture of materials. A mixture of one part brown and one part green works best.

6. Bulk it up! Try to add about 1/3 wood chips or other coarse material (pine cones, bark, small twigs) to help keep the pile loose and aerated. You can leave it in the finished compost, or screen it out and recompost it.

7. Pile it on. Prepare composting area by loosening the soil that will be under the pile to encourage microbes to enter your compost. Add a shovel-full of garden soil and mix well.

8. Water and turn your pile. Your pile should be about as moist as a wrung out sponge; damp throughout, but not soggy. Be sure to keep it moist during hot, dry periods. Turn the pile with a pitchfork every week or two. This mixes the browns and greens, breaks up dry patches, and promotes microbial activity.

9. Add to the pile. As the pile starts decaying, it will settle. Turn new materials in with a pitchfork, maintaining your carbon to nitrogen ratio. Add fruit and veggie scraps to the middle of the pile and cover.

10. Harvest your new compost! Depending on the conditions of the pile, your pile should be ready in a few months. If you are not turning your pile, or if you are always adding new materials, the bottom and middle sections may be done, while the top is not finished. Your compost is finished when the material in your pile is cool, dark, crumbly and earthy smelling.

DO Compost:

- Grass clippings
- Old plants and potting soil
- Shredded paper
- Leaves
- Flowers
- Fruit and veggie scraps
- Coffee grounds and tea bags
- Eggshells

Do NOT Compost:

- Meat or fish
- Dairy products
- Breads or grains
- Greasy or oily foods
- Diseased plants
- Noxious or invasive weeds
- Weeds "gone to seed"
- Pet feces

Troubleshooting: Common Problems & Solutions

Symptom	Cause	Solution
Compost pile smells very bad.	It is probably not receiving enough oxygen, or there are too many "greens".	Turn more often and possibly add more dry, absorbent materials.
Compost pile will not heat up.	It may not have enough oxygen. Or it may be too wet or too dry.	Add more "greens", and check your moisture level.
Compost pile is damp and warm in the center, but nowhere else.	It may be too small.	Collect more materials and mix them in until your pile is at least 3' x 3'.
The center of the compost pile is dry.	It may not be getting enough water.	Water the pile with a hose while turning.
Compost pile has an ammonia odor.	You may have too much green material, or it might be too wet.	Turn pile and add brown material, such as sawdust or brown leaves to help balance the nitrogen.

The Rethink Waste Project provides tools and resources to help you reduce waste – and rethink the way you think about waste. From learning easy ways to reduce waste at home, such as composting and simple non-toxic alternatives, to purchasing greener products and understanding what it means to buy local, we can all take steps towards the same goal: reduce, reuse, recycle and rethink.
Visit **RethinkWasteProject.org** to learn more.

Rethink Waste is a project of The Environmental Center. We translate sustainability into practical local action to create a healthy future for people and the planet.

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