

TOP 10 QUESTIONS ABOUT BACKYARD COMPOSTING

1. A neighbor is complaining about my pile even though it doesn't smell. What do I do?

Keep a neat pile and its surroundings. Keep weeds pulled; use fresh wood chips around pile.

Ask them to help contribute to pile.

Ask them to share the cost of a drum composter.

Landscape or fence the area.

If you sense an odor, immediately make a correction.

Explain the benefits of composting every chance you get.

Give them a brochure telling them why you do it and how it works.

2. A strong, sweet odor is coming from the pile. What's wrong? How do I correct?

What's wrong: Odor occurs when composting leaves alone. Pile is damp but is not heating up. It lacks Nitrogen, slow to decompose, has too little moisture, poor aeration, pile too small – minimum pile should be 3' x 3' x 3'.

Solutions: Insulate the sides and top, put pile next to wall that heats up, S or SW.

Aerate by mixing ingredients – new especially N source materials like fresh grass clippings, fertilizers like 34-0-0, bloodmeal, humus, food waste, manures; anything considered a green material.

N fertilizer is added as 1 cup 34-0-0 per 3 bushels of compost.

Add moisture as you mix and turn ingredients, cover pile with plastic.

Soak dry materials before adding to the pile.

Soak pile from above by placing a trickle line on it temporarily.

3. Pile smells like rotten eggs. What's wrong? How do I correct?

What's wrong: Air and water are out of balance (too much water.) Water should fill no more than 40-60% of pore space. Pile is decomposing anaerobically instead of aerobically. These new bacteria produce ammonia products like hydrogen sulfide gas. Not enough air in pile, materials compacted too tight, temperature of pile is too high >140 degrees F. Possibly too much moisture.

Solutions: Add dry ingredients like sawdust, wood chips, shredded newspapers, straw, etc. Avoid packing of leaves, grass clippings, turn pile more frequently, use special aeration tools, turn by slicing then inverting each piece. Avoid using grease, fat, meat scraps and bones (kitchen wastes). Never let fresh ingredients on the surface – get them mixed right away. As a last resort, shift the whole pile to a new location.

4. Pile is noticeably wet and leaking water into the surrounding area. How do I correct it?

Taller piles tend to leak. Nutrients are leaking out producing a manure tea – try to capture ingredients with dry materials, which you put back in the pile or use as a starter fertilizer. Reduce the amount of water added to pile, add topsoil or peat, cover pile during heavy rains, break pile into smaller units and add dry ingredients to each. Place absorbing mulch like sawdust or straw around the outside of pile. Try squeeze test – compost should feel damp with just a drop or two of water when tightly squeezed.

5. Animals are attracted to my pile. What is wrong? How do I correct it?

-What's wrong: Fatty food wastes most likely the reason. Never add meats, grease, etc.
-Solutions: Turn pile more frequently, animal-proof the compost pile design, go to a drum-type composter. Fence in compost area to keep animals out. Put compost pile outside a fenced in yard if you are concerned with household pets getting into it. Place animal repellent products around area of pile.

6. Slugs, earwigs, and yellow jackets like my pile. Is there a problem?

No. Earwigs are never a serious threat and aid in the compost process as scavengers. They prefer cooler piles, will be a change of the season's pest especially during wet seasons.

No. Slugs are not a problem but enhance composting. Can be a reservoir area for slugs attacking nearby garden plants. They prefer fresh wastes only. Place 2 x 4's wrapped with wet burlap nearby to capture and dispose of them.

Yes, a properly constructed compost pile should not attract yellow jackets. This again indicates exposed food wastes, bones, vegetable scraps, fruits, etc.

7. Finished product takes too long to make? What's wrong?

Pile too small to heat up. Try a larger pile. Turn ingredients in the Fall before pile freezes. Insulate the pile so that it can be turned throughout the winter. Add Nitrogen materials to boost the heating-up process. Go to drum composters.

8. Weeds seem to germinate after using the finished product. What's wrong?

Pile will not heat up enough to kill all weed seeds because of the seed coat. Noxious weeds should not be added – 11 in PA including thistles, morningglories, J-grass, crabgrass, ivy roots, and many others. Add weed ingredients before they go to seed. Chop up rhizomes to less than a quarter inch, let dry on ground surface in the sun before adding to the pile. Can be composted alone and covered in black plastic for 2 years. Only thorough and hot composting works to kill plant parts that are propagated vegetatively.

9. I can never get a good balance (mix of ingredients) in my pile. What can I do?

The art of composting. Use 1-1-1 (100 lbs. leaves, 100 lbs. grass clippings and 100 lbs. manure). Start shredding all, including manure added materials by using a lawn mower on a hard, level surface. Add a larger variety of materials to the pile. Use brown and green materials in approximately equal proportions. Learn C:N ratios of materials and balance them mathematically or intuitively. Store high carbon (brown) materials like sawdust, leaves, shredded newspapers, peat moss, wood chips, etc. to add to pile during summer when a lot of green materials like grass clipping and weeds are going into pile. Mix, mix, mix. Get a composting tool!

Add lime and/or soil to make a more alkaline compost. Add acid-loving plant parts like evergreen tree needles, rhody leaves and peat.

10. What materials can be added to the pile that I normally don't think of adding?

Shredded newspapers, thorny plants, sod if kept moist and covered with black plastic, coffee grounds, woody plant materials, houseplants, tea leaves, wood ash, orange peels, egg shells, fruit pits.

Avoid herbicide treated plant materials, butter, mayonnaise, cat litter, cheese, chicken manure, dog manure, fish scraps, lard, plants harboring serious diseases, plants that take too long to break down – bamboo, milk, oil, peanut butter, sour cream, vegetable oil.