



# Tip Sheet 1: Basics on Backyard Composting of Food Scraps

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## What is compost?

Compost is a dark, crumbly, earthy-smelling, soil-like material that results from the breakdown and decay of organic materials (living things such as plants and animals). Beneficial organisms such as insects, fungi, and bacteria, feed on materials that are high in Nitrogen (green materials) and Carbon (brown materials). The addition of Oxygen (Air), and Moisture (Water) provides an ideal environment for these organisms to thrive and break down the organic materials. While compost happens in nature, we can speed up the process.



## Why use compost?

Adding finished compost to your soil can improve the health of your lawn, plants, and garden by adding nutrients back into the soil and it can save you money by reducing the need to buy fertilizers. It also helps the environment by making the soil better able to stay moist, which reduces the amount of run-off from rain and melting snow.



## How does compost happen?

Organisms called decomposers breakdown dead organic materials to produce compost. These decomposers include microorganisms such as bacteria and fungi (mold and mushrooms, for example) and macroorganisms such as worms, mites, millipedes, and sowbugs. As decomposers feed on the organic materials, the pile will heat up and start to get smaller. The food scraps and garden trimmings you put in your compost pile provide for the basic needs for these living organisms, which creates the perfect conditions for them to survive.

# Follow these Four Steps to Backyard Composting of Food Scraps

- 1 Add your “browns” and “greens” material to your backyard compost bin (2:1 by volume).** Browns are dry carbon-rich plant materials, such as breads, grains, eggshells, dried leaves and twigs, while greens are wet, nitrogen-rich materials such as fruit and vegetable peelings, coffee grounds, tea bags and loose tea, and grass clippings. Add these to your compost bin in a 2:1 ratio by volume. For example, for every two cups of browns add 1 cup of greens.
- 2 Keep your pile moist but not soggy.** Moisture allows for your compost pile to decompose faster. You are looking for a pile that is as moist as a wrung-out sponge. If your pile is too dry it will slow down the decomposition process.
- 3 Mix your browns and greens.** Mixing your browns and greens together will ensure that all the materials are getting enough oxygen and moisture to keep the organisms in the pile happy.
- 4 Chop everything into smaller pieces.** Adding materials that are chopped in 4-6 inch pieces will speed up the decomposition process because you are exposing new surfaces where decomposers can start feeding.



## When is the compost ready?

Finished compost is rich, dark, and soil-like material with an earthy smell. Check to see if your compost is ready: place a few handfuls of in a jar; open the jar after a few days and if there is a bad odor, the compost needs more time to mature.



## For More Information

[MontgomeryCountyMD.gov/RecycleRight](https://montgomerycountymd.gov/RecycleRight) | 311 or 240-777-0311



Montgomery County, Maryland  
Department of Environmental Protection  
Recycling and Resource Management Division  
Waste Reduction and Recycling Section  
2425 Reedie Drive, 4th Floor, Wheaton, Maryland 20902