

ESC Green Guide

Palmer Township Environmental Steering Committee

Composting

Is your soil slow-draining due to too much clay in it? The solution is compost. Or perhaps your soil is too sandy and drains too fast? The solution is compost. Compost is the magic ingredient for balancing your soil. Buying compost is expensive, but you can make it for less with a relatively small investment in time and money. Plus, you can benefit your community and the environment at the same time.

Kitchen waste like wilted lettuce, potato peels, eggshells, coffee grounds, and past-their-prime vegetables are usually tossed in the trash but can nourish the garden instead. The EPA estimates that 30% of what we throw away is food scraps and yard waste. Keeping these out of the landfill will save space and reduce the release of the greenhouse gas, methane.



Many recycling grants come back to the community based on recycling performance, the tons of material recycled as a percentage of the total trash tonnage. There are two main ways to raise the level of recycling performance. The first way is to recycle more materials or heavier materials; the second way is to reduce the total amount of trash. Composting can help us do that.

Composting is a natural process that breaks down, or decomposes, organic matter into humus. Decomposition is the reason the forests are not filled to the tree branches with piles of fallen leaves. It's nature's own nutrient recycling process.

The uses of compost are many. You can top-dress lawns, add it to annual flower and vegetable gardens, and use it as mulch or in a thin layer beneath wood chip mulch. However, do not mix it into the soil before installing permanent landscapes, such as beneath new lawns, in perennial gardens, and in planting holes of trees and shrubs, because after it decomposes completely the soil level will sink. It will also discourage the roots of trees and shrubs from branching out into the surrounding soil. Some benefits of compost are:

- Improves aeration of heavy clay soils and increases the moisture-holding ability of sandy soils;
- Increases soil earthworm and microbial activity that benefit plant growth;
- Provides nutrients needed for plant growth.

Your compost pile can be in an enclosed Earth Machine bin on the ground, a tumbler on a stand, a rolling barrel, or in open bins. It can be store bought or home made. By Palmer Township ordinance, your compost pile must be at least five feet from your property line.



When composting, layer green (high in nitrogen) and brown (high in carbon) materials in a ratio of one part green to two parts brown. Turn the pile occasionally to add oxygen; keep the pile moist but not wet. Adding a shovelful of garden soil at the start will provide microorganisms that will help in decomposing the materials.

Green materials include vegetables, fruits, house plants, flowers, grass clippings, most weeds, fresh greens, coffee grounds, tea bags and horse, cow, and chicken manure. If you are short on greens ask your local coffee shop for coffee grounds.

Brown materials include dried grass, leaves, straw, shredded paper, nut shells, and sawdust and wood chips from untreated wood. You can stockpile your brown yard waste in a bin until needed.

Eggshells are considered neutral.

If your compost pile is doing nothing, add more greens or water. If it starts to develop a foul odor, add more browns or turn the pile more frequently.

There are some materials that should not be composted:

1. No meat, fish, bones, or dairy products;
2. No oils or grease or products containing them;
3. No cat, dog, or human feces;
4. No plants treated with pesticides or herbicides;
5. No pressure-treated wood scraps, diseased plants, weed seeds, or roots.
6. No glossy paper; it may contain chemicals from the process used to create it.



Once you start to use compost on your plants, you will see why gardeners call it “black gold.”

What can I do?

1. Give composting a try. If you decide afterward that it's not for you, that's OK.
2. If home composting is not your thing, you can pick up some free compost and mulch for your yard from the Berks Street Yard Waste Composting Center. Check Palmer Township's website for hours of operation.
3. Remember that compost does contain nutrients and, when added in excess, can over-fertilize the soil and leach out those excess nutrients into stormwater during heavy rains. This is called non-point source pollution. A soil test will reveal how much nutrients your soil needs.

Further reading in the Green Guide

1. Leave the Leaves

Further reading online

1. Green Action Center. Composting Basics and Getting Started. <https://greenactioncentre.ca/reduce-your-waste/composting-basics-and-getting-started/>
2. Composting, by Earth Easy, includes tips for success. <https://learn.eartheasy.com/guides/composting/>