



# A down to earth guide to composting

Easy waste reduction in 10 minutes a week

[edmonton.ca/compost](http://edmonton.ca/compost)

THE CITY OF  
**Edmonton**

# What is composting?



Composting is a natural process that breaks down organic kitchen and yard materials.



Composting turns organic materials into a dark, earthy material called compost.



Finished compost improves soil and makes your plants, garden and lawn healthier.

Composting:

- Reduces waste – almost half of your garbage is compostable.
- Improves soil quality by adding nutrients and keeping soil moist.
- Saves energy – less material is processed through the waste system.

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## How do I choose a compost bin?

Composting can be done with an open pile or in a compost bin. A bin keeps your compost pile neat, provides weather protection, and keeps animals out.

Composters in all shapes, sizes, and materials are available from your local hardware store or garden centre.

### When choosing a bin, consider:

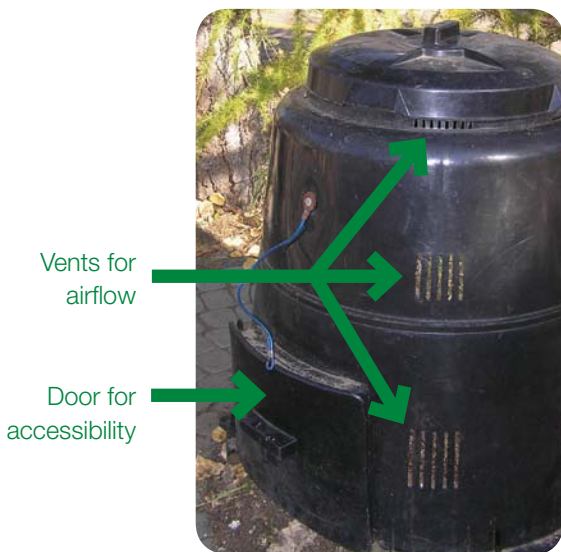
- **Airflow** – Fresh air kills odours.
- **Accessibility** – Make it easy to turn the compost by choosing a bin with a removable front.
- **Size** – One cubic metre is a good size for beginners (about the size of a dishwasher).



Location, Location, Location! A compost bin has to be convenient to use, or it may get ignored.

### Where to put your bin:

- Choose a convenient, level, well-drained, and sunny area.
- Place your bin on concrete or soil, not on wood or vinyl.
- Leave some space around the bin to store extra leaves, soil, and other materials.
- Shelter the bin from wind to reduce maintenance.
- In the winter, find a sunny, sheltered spot close to your kitchen door.



**TIP**

A black plastic composting bin placed in a sunny spot is easier to maintain. Sunshine speeds up composting.



# What can I compost?

To compost successfully you need a mixture of roughly equal amounts of greens and browns.

## Greens (nitrogen rich)

### From the yard:

- Green garden waste
- Weeds before they go to seed
- Flowers
- Green grass clippings

### From the kitchen:

- Vegetable/fruit peels and scraps
- Green leaves
- Coffee grounds
- Tea bags

## Browns (carbon rich)

### From the yard:

- Dried leaves
- Dried brown grass clippings
- Evergreen needles
- Straw
- Prunings and cuttings
- Sawdust (mix it in)

### From the home:

- Dryer and vacuum lint
- Paper/cardboard (mix it in)
- Dead houseplants

## Yuck. Don't compost this

### From the yard:

- Weeds with seed heads or with aggressive roots
- Diseased plants
- Pet waste

### From the kitchen:

- Meat, fish or bones
- Fat, oil or grease
- Dairy products



If you're a beginner, add a few more browns at first. It will take longer to finish, but will be worry-free.



Composting is a fun way to teach your kids about the environment.

# How to compost

You have your site, your bin is set up, and you are ready to go! What's next?

## Collecting materials in the kitchen and garden

The simplest way to collect kitchen materials is to use a plastic container stored either on the counter or under the sink. When it's full, take it out and add to the compost bin.

Collect and add yard and garden material to the compost as it is produced throughout the year.

### TIP

Chop materials into smaller pieces before you put them in the composter. This helps them break down faster.



Composting is easy. Find the method that works best for you at [Edmonton.ca/compost](http://Edmonton.ca/compost).

## Putting waste in your composter (Layer, layer, layer!)

1. Put any prunings, wood chips or twigs in the bin first to let air into the bottom of the bin.
2. Layer greens and browns.
3. Add water to brown layers when dry.
4. Add dirt to green layers as you go.



### TIP

If you have only a few kitchen scraps, fill your bin one-third full with browns, and bury your greens in the bin as they collect.

## Composting in Winter

Winter weather will stop or drastically slow down the process. To continue composting year-round, use a black plastic bin and place it in a sunny area sheltered from wind. If your compost bin is overflowing, put kitchen waste in a lined container, leave it outside to freeze, and add it to the pile in spring.

## Maintaining my compost bin

Natural organisms turn organic waste into compost. They need fresh air and a bit of moisture to break down the material, so check on your compost every week.

To help your organics turn into compost, remember to:

- Add fresh materials as they accumulate. Mix them in with the layer below the top.
- Keep your compost moist. Add drier materials or water as needed to maintain the proper moisture level. The pile should be as wet as a wrung-out sponge.
- Fluff the compost once a week. This adds air, which encourages microbial activity and kills odours.

## Harvesting my compost

Finished compost will end up towards the bottom of the bin. To harvest your compost, remove the unfinished material from the top of the bin and take the finished compost out. Return any unfinished material back into the bin.

To use it on your lawn or in a potting soil mix, sift finished compost through a 7-21 millimetre (1/2 inch) metal screen. Put materials that aren't done back into your bin.

**TIP**

Need help? Call the compost hotline at 780-496-5526.

### When is my compost ready?

If you add material as it is generated, fluff your compost, and keep it moist, you will have finished compost within four to six months. Finished compost is dark (like soil), crumbly (unlike original material), and smells like earth.

## Using my compost

Compost improves soil and makes your lawn and garden healthier. Also, since compost is natural, it's almost impossible to over-use it like you can with chemical fertilizers.

Three ways to use your finished compost:

1. Sprinkle one centimetre on your lawn a few times a year and watch your grass turn green.
2. Work it into your soil for tastier (and natural!) vegetables.
3. Use it on your flower beds to have a garden that will make the neighbours turn green.



Get dirty! Finished compost is dark (like soil), crumbly (unlike original material), and smells like earth.

# What's going on? A troubleshooting guide

PROBLEM	SOLUTION
<b>Symptom:</b> Compost has an unpleasant odour	
Compost is too wet	Add browns (see page 4).
Clumps of greens (like grass clippings) are creating ammonia	Turn the compost to allow air in.
Not enough air	Mix in twigs and plant stems to create air pockets.
<b>Symptom:</b> Compost pile will not heat up (heat isn't necessary, but speeds up the process)	
Compost lacks moisture or nitrogen	Check the moisture level. It should be as moist as a wrung-out sponge.  Add high nitrogen materials like fresh grass clippings or vegetable scraps.
Compost pile or bin is too small	It's best if your bin or pile is one cubic metre.
<b>Symptom:</b> Compost process is too slow	
The particles in the compost may be too big	Cut waste materials into small pieces no larger than 20-25 centimetres (7-8 inches).
The centre dried out or too much air is passing through	Mix in small amounts of topsoil with the materials.
<b>Symptom:</b> Compost bin attracts pests <i>(Note: worms and other decomposers are part of a healthy compost pile)</i>	
Flies are attracted to fruit waste	Ensure that all freshly added kitchen scraps are covered with soil or buried into the bin.
Mice, wasps, and ants nest in dry compost	Don't abandon your compost at the end of gardening season.
Magpies, dogs and skunks are attracted by animal products	Don't add meat and dairy scraps to your compost bin.



Consider your neighbours!

- keep the area tidy
- deal with odours right away
- place your bin away from their eating or sitting area

### **For detailed information**

Visit [edmonton.ca/compost](http://edmonton.ca/compost)

### **Need help?**

Call the compost hotline at 780-496-5526  
or order a personal visit from a compost doctor  
at [MCRP@edmonton.ca](mailto:MCRP@edmonton.ca)

### **See working composters in action**

Visit the Compost Education Centre at the  
John Janzen Nature Centre in Fort Edmonton Park  
7000-143 Street  
Whitemud Drive & Fox Drive

### **COMPOSTING WORKSHOPS**

Learn the basics of composting at the John Janzen Nature Backyard Compost Education Centre. Two-hour workshops cover the basics of the composting process, what to expect from your ingredients and tricks to make it work – fast! Workshops run May through October.

Edmonton residents may purchase an Earth Machine compost bin or compost aerator at a reduced cost.

**Get workshop details at**  
[\*\*edmonton.ca/compost\*\*](http://edmonton.ca/compost)