

# Compost Happens

By Shilo Nielsen

As gardeners, we already know that we need to “feed” our plants in order for them to grow bigger, give us nice flowers, fruit, shade, etc. What we think of as feeding our plants with fertilizers, is actually supplying nutrients that the plants need to make their own food, or energy. This is important because when you are “feeding” your plants, what you really want to do is to feed the soil. If the soil and its associated microbes are alive and well,



plants will thrive (with less chemicals and pesticides too). This is why synthetic fertilizers are like drugs to the plant. It gives them a quick shot of some critical nutrients, mainly nitrogen, which causes the plants to bolt up quickly. The side affect is that it tends to destroy the soil microbes. No soil microbes, no further nutrients available from the soil, until the next application of the chemical. It becomes a vicious cycle. (Incidentally, this lush growth from synthetic nitrogen is also attractive to pests such as aphids).

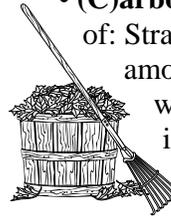
So how do we feed the soil? With lots of organic matter! And one of the best ways to do this is with compost. Compost can be purchased of course (in small quantities or in bulk at the Nursery) and most of us will have to supplement with an outside supply at some point. But as long as we have kitchen scraps and yard waste, why not take some burden off the landfills and use it as nature intended!

**Recipe – what’s in it? Ratio of 1 part Nitrogen (greens) to 3 parts Carbon (browns), layered.** Moisture: damp but not soaking. Needs oxygen or it will be stinky.

• **(N)itrogen (one part) component** can consist of: Stable scraps like horse, rabbit, pig, goat, and chicken manure; Blood meal; Cottonseed meal; Legumes such as alfalfa and pea clover; Green garden waste like weeds (try to avoid seed heads); Algae and seaweed; Coffee grounds and filters; Hair; Kitchen vegetable scraps; Grass clippings without chemical fertilizers from the first two or three weeks of spring when they are lush and tender (at this time they are high in nitrogen but afterward they go into the carbon category).

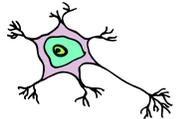


• **(C)arbon (three parts) components** consist of: Straw, dried leaves, sawdust in small amounts (as long as it hasn’t been treated with chemicals), untreated wood chips in small amounts, shredded newspaper, ashes (use in moderation), cardboard, dryer lint, corn stalks and corn cobs, shredded brown paper grocery bags, pine needles and pine cones, oak leaves (or most other leaves, preferably shredded), egg shells.



**Don’t Use:** Ashes from coal or charcoal, cat litter or droppings, dog waste, fish scraps, ashes from treated wood, meat, fat, grease, oils, bones, milk, cheese, yogurt, potatoes, sawdust and wood shavings from chemically treated wood, and most of all, your worst weeds! (for example: Bermuda grass, you will have it growing in your pile).

**What’s going on – microbes in action:** Stirring replenishes food and oxygen for the microorganisms that are hard at work breaking down the ingredients. Heat helps the ingredients quickly decompose and keeps the pile operating at its peak. Moreover, at 131° most disease causing pathogens die as well as pests, seeds, and weeds.



**Fast** - To speed the composting process, layer the ingredients, moisten, and turn often. Don’t add additional material to the active pile, use another pile. A 3x3 pile is as big as you would want to handle. In this manner, compost will happen in 1 to 2 months. It can be further aged with no problem. If it is raining, be sure to cover the piles so water soluble nutrients (such as nitrogen) don’t leach out.

**Slow** – a pile you just throw whatever on, whenever you have it. Try to keep the 1 to 3 ratio going as best you can. This method can take up to a year to make compost happen.

You don’t have to use a bin, but it does make it easier, especially for the Fast method. You can build your own out of wire or wood, or buy one of the easy-up plastic ones (available at the Nursery). Tumblers work as well, but are more expensive. We also have compost thermometers so you can see how hot your pile is getting.

If you don’t have space for a full pile, worm bins can make use of your kitchen scraps as well. Plans to build your own can be found at the “Links” section of our website. Come in and let us help you get started making Compost Happen!

