



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
EXTENSION

And



How to: Compost in a Bin

Tom Hutsell, Ramsey County Master Gardener

Introduction

Plastic compost bins are designed primarily to **compost the relatively low volume of organic matter produced by residential kitchens**, commonly referred to as kitchen scraps in backyard composting literature. For this reason, the bin is also designed to exclude entry by nuisance animals, such as raccoons – a big advantage compared to conventional pile composting.

The overall objective of using a compost bin of this nature is to **reduce the volume of household organics entering the waste stream** (landfills, processing facilities, wastewater treatment plants through sink disposal systems, etc.). While this compost bin will compost some yard trimmings, such as leaves, grass, and garden wastes, **it is not designed to handle the total volume of yard waste** generated on a typical residential property, which is **better accomplished by using conventional pile composting**.

Initial Start-up

1. **Locate** the bin near a water source on reasonably level ground, concrete or other hard surface.
2. **Add** small twigs or other coarse material to the bottom 5-6 inches of the bin (to allow air circulation from the bottom).
3. **Completely fill the bin** with about equal parts of relatively high nitrogen organic matter (sometimes called “greens”) and high carbon organic matter (sometimes called “browns”). Examples of high nitrogen organic matter include food scraps, green grass clippings, green leaves, and alfalfa meal. Examples of high carbon organic matter include dried leaves, dried grass clippings, straw, newsprint and paper towels.
4. **Add water as necessary** to adjust the moisture content of this organic matter to that of a damp sponge. If the mixture contains the proper ratio of carbon to nitrogen, it should heat to about 130 F in about 3 days and maintain this heat for about 2 weeks.

Follow-Up Composting

When the initial temperature begins to drop, the volume of organic material in the bin will have decreased by as much as one-third. At this point, you can begin to add increments of organic material (a mixture of equal parts greens and browns) adjusted to damp sponge water content.

Each time you add some material to the compost bin, it may be helpful to mix it into the top several inches of the material present in the bin. Each batch of organic material added to the bin should heat somewhat (although not necessarily to 130 F), maintain that heat for several days and decrease in volume slightly.

After several additions of material the bin will be full. **At this point, you can either dump the material out of the bin and start over or begin removing finished compost** from the bottom of the bin in a “continuous” mode (take out some from the bottom when you add some material to the top).

The compost bin will be active only during the growing season (about mid-May to mid-October). **During winter months, kitchen scraps can be added to the top of the bin.** When spring returns, high carbon organic matter can be mixed in with the collected kitchen scraps and the composting process can resume.