



Got Compost? Read About Compost Bins and the Finished Product

Consider how you store your compost -- and learn about testing the finished product.

(Compost Basics by Jessica Walliser, page 5 of 5)

Where to Compost

For large-scale production of compost, ingredients are usually organized into windrows and turned with a tractor or bulldozer.

Moderate-sized farms may prefer a series of large, freestanding piles turned by hand or with a tractor. Home gardeners and small farmers have more options, including both commercial and homemade composting bins.

Commercial composting bins can be constructed of plastic, wood or recycled materials and are available in many shapes and sizes.

Freestanding, composting containers, including plastic, oblong tumblers and spinning cylinders, are meant to make turning the pile easier.

Photo by Karen Keb Acevedo

Your compost bin--even as simple as one crafted out of chicken wire--will help you give back to the earth and grow better, healthier plants. Many of these models come with handles or cranks that rotate the whole container along with its contents. The contents of rectangular, ground-level composting bins are a little more difficult to turn, but the finished compost is easy to empty out through bottom doors; these types are usually cheaper to purchase.

Kits for do-it-yourselfers are another option; containing metal corner pieces and a lid, these kits are installed by sliding appropriately sized lumber (purchased separately) into the metal pieces to construct a square bin.

If commercial composting bins are used, consider their size (3' x 3' x 3' is the minimum size necessary to reach required temperatures), ease of use, number of aeration holes (especially important for enclosed tumblers) and appearance.

If the bin will be prominently located, it may be worth spending a little extra money for an attractive model.

Homemade composting bins can be constructed of pallets (avoid ones used to store chemicals), wood slats (never use treated lumber—the preserving chemicals may leach into the compost), hay bales, perforated plastic trash cans or wire cages. There are many construction plans available online.

The Timeline

Organic matter can fully compost in as little as four weeks or as long as six months (or more!).

The finish time depends on the ingredients used, the C:N ratio, the frequency of aeration, the moisture content and the size of the ingredients when the composting process began (shredding or chopping materials before adding them to the pile will help speed decomposition).

For record-fast compost, begin with two to three times more “browns” than “greens,” finely shred or chop all ingredients, add a few shovelfuls of finished compost to the new pile, aerate at least once a week, maintain moderate moisture levels and actively monitor temperatures (don't forget to thank those microbes, too!).

Testing the Finished Product

Tests for C:N ratio, compost stability and pathogens must be documented before any compost (even homemade) is used on a certified organic farm. Tests can also be conducted for nutrient content, an assessment of biological activity and pH.



For home gardeners, testing isn't necessary, but it is interesting to find out what your finished compost is all about. Remember, temperature is really the best indicator of proper decomposition—160 degrees F is an easy indicator that compost is done right.

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About the Author: Horticulturist Jessica Walliser can be heard every Saturday from 12 to 2pm EST on Sirius satellite radio channel 114 where she co-hosts "The Organic Gardeners." For more on organic growing, check out her new book, *Grow Organic: More Than 250 Tips and Ideas for Growing Flowers, Veggies, Lawns and More* (St. Lynn's Press, 2007).