

COMPOST

NOTES

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Dear Composters

Dear Composters:

I hope your composting efforts this past year have been successful. Composting yields benefits slowly, and I'm afraid that it is often hard for us to appreciate the benefits in these times of instant gratification. As an example I offer the largest perennial flower bed on our property. Formerly the edge of an old pasture, it started out as sandy and very rocky soil that even drought tolerant plants struggled in (*except of course those amazing weeds!*). This past October I helped dig and divide some overgrown flowers from this same bed. The soil was moist, dark, and friable. It took years of composting and mulching to improve the soil in this garden, but the effort was well worth it.

We hope you find this information helpful, and welcome your questions and suggestions for future issues. Have a happy holiday season!

Cheers,
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Ask Dr. Compost

Dear Dr. Compost:

Cleaning the food scrap container I keep in my kitchen is a bit of a drag - do you have any suggestions?

Assign the job to someone else. Just kidding, they probably wouldn't like to do it either. There are some helpful suggestions, so maybe one of these will work for you.

You can line your container with a biodegradable plastic bag. There are now plastic bags made from specially designed polymers that will decompose safely in your compost bin. You will most likely have to order these bags directly from an Internet retailer or a mail order catalog. Gardening supply companies sometimes feature these in their "compost accessories" section. Look for bags that meet ASTM D6400 standards for "compostability" (these bags have been independently tested for biodegradability). You will have to search for a bag size that fits your container. I found some 2 gallon bags that cost about \$20 for 50 bags, shipping included.

If you don't want to go with the liner bags, here's another option. Make collection containers by cutting the top off milk cartons, plastic milk jugs, or soda bottles. All you have to do is rinse out the container after using it a time or two, and put it in your recycling bin. Since you only use the container a couple of times, it only takes a good rinse to clean it enough for recycling.

Cold Weather Composting

The winter months present a dilemma to people who compost at home. Fruit and vegetable scraps are still available, but will they really break down in your bin? Is it a problem if they don't break down? Do you really want to slog through snow to take the food scraps out to the bin?

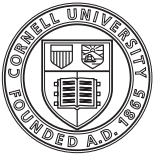
If you decide you'd like to continue to compost throughout the winter you have several reasonable options. Some home composters have indoor worm bins that enable them to easily handle the food scraps. Others simply continue to add food scraps to their outdoor bin or pile. As the temperatures fall, the compost cools and eventually all activity ceases. Any food scraps added to the pile quickly freeze, and these frozen scraps are attractive to animals. Thus it is important to carefully cover the food scraps with a layer of leaves, straw or other carbon-rich material. A bin with a lid on it makes winter composting much easier because it keeps the snow off, and will help keep larger pests out of the compost. Some adventurous home composters have insulated their bins or piles with a thick layer of leaves or straw, allowing the composting process to continue for all or most of the winter. If you decide to try this method resist the urge to turn the pile during the winter, as the fresh air will usually do more harm than good because it cools the pile down.

One particularly dedicated individual reported a rather unique way to keep her food scraps out of the landfill. She bagged them up and stored them in a chest freezer, then added the scraps to her bin in the spring. You may want to run that method by your significant other before trying it.



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Holiday Gift Idea



If someone you know has been struggling with the task of turning compost consider purchasing them a special tool to make the job less of a hassle. Compost turning tools are available in a wide variety of styles. Most of these tools don't actually turn or mix the compost very much, but they do fluff up the materials to improve air flow in the pile. The most common ones feature a metal tube with a handle at one end and two small wings that fold into a streamlined point at the other end. They are easy to push into the compost, and when pulled up the wings spread open to loosen up the compacted compost. This can require a bit of strength, especially when the materials in the pile are fresh, but it's a quick way to help speed up the composting process.

There are some alternative styles of turning tools that feature cranks or sharp claws. The prices for these tools generally range from about \$25-50. The best bet for finding them is to do an Internet search using the key words "home compost turning tools" or "home compost aeration tools".

CFL Disposal & Handling

Using compact fluorescent lights (CFL's) is a great way to lower your energy bill and help combat global warming. CFL's contain a small amount of mercury, however, so proper handling and disposal is important. Non-working CFL's and tube fluorescent lights can be properly disposed of at the hazardous waste collection facility at the Broome County Landfill. Collection dates at the facility are held two or three days a month. Visit www.gobroomecounty.com or call 778-2250 for details and a collection schedule.

When installing, removing, or otherwise handling fluorescent lights be careful not to break the bulb. The small amount of mercury contained in CFL's poses some limited health risks if released. If you accidentally break a bulb do not vacuum because a standard vacuum will spread the mercury dust. For instructions on how to clean up a broken bulb visit www.dec.state.ny.us

If you would like to receive this newsletter as an electronic file please email a request to saf222@cornell.edu

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