

Compost Factsheet 2

Fundamental (and Little Known) Compost Truths

The National Home Composting Park

A Project of the American Horticultural Society

1. *You do not need a compost bin.*

You can build a pile or heap five feet wide, three feet high, and as long as you wish.

2. *You do not have to turn, churn or stir your compost pile.* Working materials with a pitchfork or aerating tool speeds up the process and creates a uniform product, but you can also wait a couple of years and "mine" your pile for humus later on.

3. *Compost bins are made not sold...* Well, you can buy a compost bin or tumbler if you wish -- there are over 90 available (from \$15 up to \$540) -- or you can simply build one from recycled wooden pallets, wire mesh, snowfencing, scrap lumber, an old garbage can, or 55-gallon plastic, metal or wooden barrels.

4. *You do not need special bioactivators or inoculants.* All the bacteria and other microorganisms you need (trillions and trillions) are already in your backyard: use a few spadefuls of soil or compost to start up a new pile.

5. *You do not need to add fertilizer to a pile to make it "cook."* Piles low in nitrogen simply take longer to decompose. For a quicker product, blend nitrogen-rich materials (grass clippings, weeds without seeds, cow or horse manure, raw vegetable or fruit scraps, and coffee grounds) with your carbon-rich materials (fallen leaves, hay, straw, dried grass clippings), roughly mixing two parts nitrogen materials to one part carbon.

6. *You do not need to add lime to a pile.* Don't worry about the low pH of all those oak leaves and pine needles: compost bacteria will neutralize those acids. Sometimes adding lime can even convert the beneficial ammonium nitrates in your pile to smelly ammonia gas compounds.

7. *Compost happens in sun or shade.* Locate your pile in a well-drained area where it's most handy for you, near a water source, and away from tree roots and wooden structures (don't build it against your garage!).

8. *Compost does not "burn."* Despite the common cooking metaphors, the heat in a pile is the byproduct of damp, happy bacteria. Piles don't spontaneously combust.

9. *Compost piles don't wear watches.* There's no hard-and-fast schedule for composting: no 14-day miracles. The process is done when it's done -- and a lot of it depends on how much time you put into the process. When your compost is coffee-brown or black, crumbly and earthy smelling, it's done. Screen it to use as a top-dressing for your lawn (1/8"-1/4" deep), use it as a mulch, or turn it into your garden beds as you prepare them for a new season (mix materials 4"-6" into existing soil).

Text prepared by Joseph M. Keyser, Director of Programs, American Horticultural Society (AHS). For additional information on the complete series of Compost Factsheets, the National Home Composting Park, or the American Horticultural Society, contact AHS, River Farm Dept. 2, 7931 East Boulevard Drive, Alexandria, VA 22308; 1-800-777-7931 or 703-768-5700. AHS is a non-profit educational organization.