

# Composting 101

Are you doing your part in saving our environment and conserving natural resources? Not sure? Check this website [www.myfootprint.org/en/visitor\\_information/](http://www.myfootprint.org/en/visitor_information/) and complete a free 10-minute survey documenting your natural resource usage. The results may be shocking. I am rather ashamed to admit that two years ago my family had some very wasteful practices and habits. If all families lived as we did in 2008, we would need 8.5 Earths to sustain life! This eye-opening survey spurred us into action; one of the new habits we embraced was composting.

Composting is a fantastic way to turn yard waste and table scraps into a soil enhancer rather than unnecessarily adding useless filler to our landfills. Choosing a suitable compost system is the first step. Compost bins are much more affordable than barrels or tumblers. However, the additional investment in an enclosed barrel or tumbler may prove to save time, headaches, and money in the end. Through personal experience, I found a compost bin to be rather cumbersome and difficult to stir its contents. It also became a smorgasbord for creepy crawly things, mice, and dogs. Sometimes it got a little scary opening the lid. Never knew what might poke its little head up at me. That is why composting barrels and tumblers quickly rose to the top of my preferred list. The best ones are easy to turn and stir up the future black gold. They are also sealed enough to dissuade pests and varmints from stealing the fuel (kitchen scraps) or setting up a rodent hotel, yet vented enough to provide vital airflow. In addition, they can turn out a batch of compost ready for the garden in about four weeks during the summer months, whereas bins could take up to a year or more to produce usable compost. Check out these websites for more information on composting options and tips [www.compostbins.com](http://www.compostbins.com), or [www.composttumbler.com](http://www.composttumbler.com).

Once the composting method is in place, it is time to fill it. Mike McGrath, author of "Book of Compost" and host of public radio's "You Bet Your Garden," is a huge proponent of saving large amounts of shredded leaves each fall to ensure one has enough "dry brown" or carbon-rich material to work with throughout the following year. (If leaves are not available, straw bales may be used as a substitute, but leaves are the real deal.) He recommends four parts of shredded leaves to one part of "wet green" nitrogen-rich material to make the best compost. Nitrogen materials include things like vegetables, fruits, peels, rinsed eggshells, grass clippings (with no herbicides), non-diseased plant clippings, coffee and tea grounds, as well as coffee filters and tea bags. Mr. McGrath emphatically recommends not adding fat, meat, bones, bread, eggs, or dairy products to

the mixture in order to reduce the chance of foul smelling concoctions and not attracting the attention of unwanted visitors.

Finally, a good composter must keep an eye and nose to the brewing heap. It should turn a dark brown or black, and have an "earthy" smell. If it has a sulfur (rotten egg) smell, add more dry brown (carbon) because it is too wet. If there is an ammonia smell, the pile contains too much wet green (nitrogen). More leaves should do the trick here too.

Composting is not an exact science, and I am not an expert, merely an enthusiast. I truly enjoy turning garbage into something useful for my friends and family to feed plants, lawns, and gardens. I am also happy to report our family's current earth score has dropped from an ugly 8.5 to an improving 4.69. (It is still nothing to brag about, but at least we are going in the right direction.) We will continue to work toward a greener home while implementing smarter practices. Composting is just one way to improve our environment and conserve resources. If composting is not for you, you may consider teaming with a neighbor and collaborating or contributing to their efforts. In any case, whether you compost or not, I hope you and your family will continually look for ways to improve our environment and lowering your earth score to a new personal best.

By Amy Polzin - 2/19/2010