



# guide to home composting

**Pennsylvania produces  
nearly two million tons of  
yard waste annually.  
That's a lot of soil  
conditioner.**

Practice the 3Rs of waste management for a healthy yard & garden:

**Reduce yard waste:** Grasscycle.

**Reuse yard waste:** Use leaves as mulch. Chip wood to use as ornamental mulch and weed control.

**Recycle yard and food waste:** Compost to produce mulch or soil conditioner.

## **grasscycling** *for a low-maintenance lawn*

Grass clippings make up a large percentage of the household waste produced each year. About 1,000 square feet of lawn can produce 200 to 500 pounds of clippings during a Pennsylvania growing season.

Grasscycling is a simple alternative to bagging clippings. Simply leave the clippings on your lawn, where they break down in seven to 14 days. The clippings act as top-dressing fertilizer and help keep your lawn green and healthy.

### *grasscycling tips*

- Mow often, cutting less than one-third of the grass growth.
- Mow when grass is not wet and use a sharp mower blade.
- Don't let large clumps of grass clippings accumulate on the lawn.
- Don't overuse harsh chemicals and fertilizers.
- Water your lawn less frequently, but for longer periods of time.
- If possible, use a mulching mower that grinds the clippings.

Use grass clippings as a surface mulch around vegetables or flowers to inhibit weed growth and retain soil moisture. Remember to keep clippings at least two inches away from young plants to avoid burning the new growth.

Add grass clippings to your compost pile for extra nutrients. To avoid odors, grass clippings should comprise no more than one-third of the pile.

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# the basics of home composting

Composting is a natural process in which microorganisms break down organic materials--such as leaves, grass and vegetable scraps--to form a rich, soil-like substance.

## key elements

- **Organic Materials.** A good mix consists of two parts “browns” (materials such as dead leaves that are high in carbon) and one part “greens” (such as fresh grass clippings and garden prunings that are high in nitrogen).
- **Moisture.** Composting materials should feel moist but not overly soggy.
- **Temperature.** Compost should feel warm to the touch except in cold winter months.
- **Air.** When materials decompose without oxygen, they can create unpleasant odors. Turn compost regularly to ensure that air reaches the center of the pile.

## ingredients

“browns”	“greens”	microorganism sources
leaves	grass	old compost
dead plants	green weeds	soil
straw	manure	cow manure
shredded paper	alfalfa	chicken manure
shredded twigs	clover	horse manure
pine needles	kitchen scraps (nonmeat, non-dairy, nonfat)	commercial compost starters
sawdust (untreated wood)	pond algae & seaweed	

## Don't compost:

- f Diseased plants or leaves
- f Plants that have gone to seed
- f Persistent weeds (poison ivy, multi-flora rose, blindweed, quackgrass, etc.)
- f Meat, dairy products and kitchen vegetables cooked with animal fats
- f Human or pet feces

## getting started

A 4'x4'x4' area out of direct sunlight is ideal for a compost pile. Choose an easily accessible spot on a grass or soil base. Composting can begin any time of the year, but many people start in the fall, when leaves are abundant. Mix the ingredients, adding water as needed. Materials should feel as damp as a wrung-out sponge.

The pile should be turned after a few weeks so that outside materials are exchanged with materials from the center of the pile. Turn compost piles about once a month, except in cold winter conditions. If more water is necessary, it can be added during turning.

Use compost as (1) mulch or top dressing for planted areas, (2) a soil amendment prior to top-planting, or (3) a potting soil additive.

## compost troubleshooting

problem	solution
too wet	Turn, add dry material; cover compost
dry, appears dusty	Turn, water; shade compost
cool to the touch	Turn, add “greens”
too warm to the touch	Turn, add soil or “browns”; water
strong odors	Turn; add soil and “browns”

## using compost

Compost is ready for use when it looks dark and crumbly and none of the starting ingredients are visible. One way to test if compost is finished is to seal a small sample in a plastic bag for 24 to 48 hours. If no strong odors are released when you open the bag, the compost is done.

As a soil amendment, compost increases water retention and adds nutrients. Work it into the top 6 to 8 inches of the soil. Compost also can be applied as a mulch directly around the base of trees and shrubs.

**Recycle this brochure: After you have read it, pass it on to a friend or shred and compost it.**

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania  
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