

“Stealth” Composting

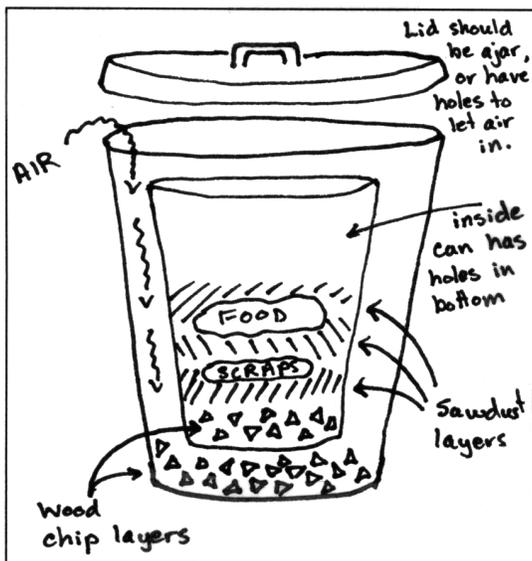
This is a technique for composting discreetly, in a garbage can or similar container. For those who want to compost but are constrained by limited space, or hypercritical neighbors, or are discouraged at the prospect of crossing a snowy yard to the compost bin, this may be the perfect technique! The bin can be beside your back door, in a garage, or even in your kitchen!

Here's what you need:

- One large plastic container and a smaller one that fits inside it (matched garbage cans work well)
- A method of punching holes in the bottom of the smaller container
- A place to put the larger container in
- Woodchips
- Sawdust (you can mix in some shredded paper)
- Food scraps!

How does it work?

Here's what it looks like, in a cut-away side view:



Here's what it looks like, in a cut-away side view: The inside container holds your food scraps. Each layer of food scraps should be covered well with sawdust. As this material starts to break down it will warm up – this is a sign that the decomposers are at work!

Warm air rises, and fresh air will get drawn in from the bottom. The coarse layer of woodchips in the outside container allows air to pass through the holes in the inside container and up through the layer of woodchips in the bottom there.

Fresh air is important, because a lack of oxygen will favor the “anaerobic” decomposers (who thrive in the absence of oxygen). These organisms help break down the food scraps, but they give off bad odors. In contrast the “aerobic” organisms (who require oxygen) do all their work without creating smells. Indoors or outdoors, the key to non-smelly compost is to allow oxygen to move through the pile!

When the container is full, move it to a spot out of the way to let the breakdown continue. You may have to add water if the contents dry out – the decomposer organisms need a moist environment. As they do their work you will see the volume go down by a third to a half. If conditions are right, it will take two to three months for the compost to finish the active phase. At that point it should be allowed to sit, preferably outdoors somewhere, with exposure to air and rain, for the compost to “cure” properly. (If you want to free up the two-can system sooner you can move the compost to an outside bin or pile after several weeks and let composting continue there.)

For more information about this indoor composting method, see the Cornell Composting web page: <http://compost.css.cornell.edu/garbagecans.html>. If you have any questions about composting, call the “Rotline” at Cooperative Extension, 272-2292.