

COMPOST

DON'T PANIC!
Troubleshooting
your

Composting is a **natural and powerful process**: food will break down without our help, but it does it on its own time, involving critters, and may or may not produce odors.



Troubleshooting is all about refining your compost to decompose efficiently and conveniently by **human** standards.

This fact sheet addresses the composting FAQs we get at the Rotline, but if you need more info, just call us at (607)272-2292

Stopping Trouble Before It Starts

BALANCE! Most issues in the compost pile happen when your pile is out of balance. By volume, for every 1 part of “greens” such as fresh, moist materials like food scraps, you will use 3 parts “browns” such as dry leaves or straw. Generally, browns are slow to decompose; greens are fast to decompose, but may cause smells. Balancing them in a 1:3 ratio will speed browns and stop greens from getting smelly.

PUT THE RIGHT STUFF IN! The better quality the inputs, the better quality the compost. Aside from the usual food scraps (cooked or raw) and garden matter, you can include the following with a little extra care.

Input	Yes, but...
Cardboard	Tear it up. Large pieces will create dry areas and slow decomposition.
Coffee Grounds	Relatively nitrogen-rich; will need extra browns to balance. Adds acid.
Cornstalks or cobs	Break down extremely slowly. Chop up & pair with extra nitrogen sources to speed decomposition.
Greywater	Be careful since most soaps contain perfumes, greases, sodium.
Eggshells	Slow to decompose. Dry out and crush them first.
Grass clippings	Only untreated grass. When fresh, layer with extra carbon. When dry use as a brown.
Manure	Poop from herbivores or farmyard animals is compostable. Horse manure often contains weed seeds.
Newspaper	Shred it first; otherwise, it will make solid mats.
Oak Leaves	Slow to break down and may raise acidity over time. Mix well into your compost.
Pinecones	Slow to break down and may raise acidity over time.
Sawdust	Very high in carbon. Mix with nitrogen-rich material. Only add in thin layers.
Dryer Lint	Only if you are not drying synthetic materials.

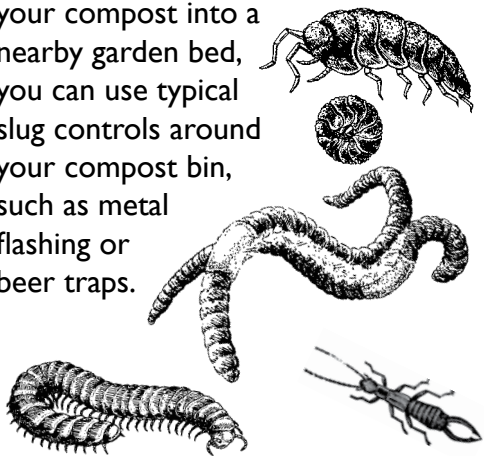
NEVER IN THE COMPOST! Home compost is not equipped to handle meat, bones, or the following ingredients. Including these will invite vermin, may introduce unwanted chemicals, or may keep your pile from decomposing well.

Input	Never Use Because...
BBQ, Coal or Wood Ash	Can be highly alkaline. Contains sulfur oxide, is bad for gardens.
All animal products	Fish, fat, meat, and bones all attract vermin and may introduce unwanted types of bacteria.
Cat Litter	Likely to contain unwanted pathogens from the feces.
Cat, dog, bird manure	Many household pets are carriers of disease organisms.
Weed Seeds	Stalks and leaves from most weeds are OK, as long as you have removed the seed heads or are composting the whole plant before it sets seeds. Never add bindweed. Even small bits of this invasive vine will root.
Treated wood	Chemicals designed to keep wood from rotting will contaminate your compost.

SYMPTOM 1-It's a Zoo in There!

I see worms, slugs, earwigs and other insects!

Great news! The presence of crawling invertebrate life (meaning bugs, slugs, and the like) means that your compost pile is a happy and thriving habitat. There is nothing you are doing wrong. However, if you want to keep slugs from moving from your compost into a nearby garden bed, you can use typical slug controls around your compost bin, such as metal flashing or beer traps.



We have fruit flies infesting our compost.

These are not harmful, but they are awfully annoying. Fruit flies eggs are known for hitching a ride to your home from the grocery store on the skins of fruits and veggies, especially tropical ones. Try freezing your food scraps before adding them to your compost pile since the eggs can't survive freezing temperatures. In your compost bin make sure all food scraps are covered with a nice blanket of "browns" such as dried leaves, straw, shredded paper, or wood chips to keep food scraps hidden from the flies. If they can't get to it, they can't eat or lay eggs on it! You can also make or purchase a fruit fly trap.

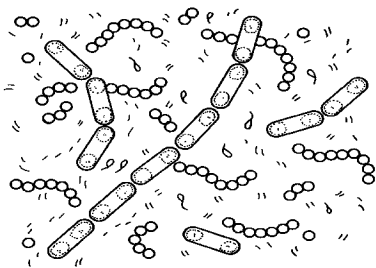
What about rats, raccoons, and other rodents?

Omnivorous rodents are attracted to smell of food, especially meats, fats, and bones. Keep all animal products (hair, fur, herbivore manures, and dried and crushed eggshells are the only exceptions) out of your compost bin to discourage rodents. Keep all food scraps covered with a nice blanket of "browns" such as dried leaves, straw, shredded paper, or wood chips to keep them hidden from rodents. If the problem persists, try using a rodent resistant bin - one with a solid top, bottom, and sides except for small vent holes. If rodents are persistent, cover the vent holes with heavy wire mesh or hardware cloth.



SYMPTOM 2-Nothing's Happening!

When compost is happening, you can literally feel the heat generated by millions and billions of bacteria doing their job. A hot compost pile means the bacteria are happy with a good balance of nutrients in the form of carbon and nitrogen, oxygen (air spaces), and water in a well-sized pile.



My compost isn't hot.

Is it big enough? A 3'x3' pile is the minimum size at which compost will really heat up. Keep adding to it.

Is it damp? Bacteria need water to do their thing.

Are there enough greens? Lots of carbon-rich browns means slow decomposition without much heat.

Is it mixed? Use a gardening fork to fluff your pile and mix up the greens and browns while adding air.

Is it done? Compost cools when fully decomposed. If it looks dark, crumbly, and smells earthy (not moldy or rotten) it may be time to harvest. Well done!

Some items aren't decomposing.

Did you chop up food scraps before adding them to the compost? Adding small material (1" or 2" chunks) means more surface area for bacteria and quicker decomposition.

I see corncobs, avocado pits, peach pits, and eggshells. These take a long time to decompose. Break them up if possible; add them back into your bin after your compost harvest.

Matted leaves? Break up layers of leaves or grass by mixing your compost with a garden fork. Alternatively, you can use a lawnmower or shredder to shred the leaves before adding to the pile.

SYMPTOM 3-What's That Smell?!

My compost smells like rotten eggs, rancid butter, & vinegar!

That smell is produced by anaerobic bacteria. Fluff the pile to aerate it and add more browns.

I smell ammonia!

Nitrogen molecules bind and form ammonia - that means too many fresh greens in your bin. Mix in more browns to balance the pile.

It smells sickly sweet.

If your compost is mostly garden waste, this may be a sign of slow decomposition. Add more nitrogen rich materials and mix well.



LOVE
YOUR
COMPOST!

Master Composters of Tompkins County



RECYCLING AND
MATERIALS
MANAGEMENT
OF TOMPKINS COUNTY

Cooperative Extension
Tompkins County