

Turn over a new leaf

Compost for healthy soil



What is compost?

Compost is decomposed organic matter. It is dark, crumbly, and earthy-smelling and is formed as part of the earth's biological cycle of growth and decay. Plants grow by capturing energy from the sun, carbon dioxide from the air, and nutrients and water from the soil. When plants die, they become raw materials for the composting or decay process.

The value of compost

Compost enriches soil, and healthy soil provides many benefits to your plants and the environment.

If you have a garden, lawn, trees, shrubs, or even planter boxes, you can make and use compost. Compost reduces yard and kitchen scrap waste, which in King County makes up over 25% of the average person's garbage.

Making and using compost is a key component of the five steps to natural yard care.

- 1 Build healthy soil (with compost and mulch).
- 2 Plant right for your site.
- 3 Practice smart watering.
- 4 Think twice before using pesticides.
- 5 Practice natural lawn care.

By working with nature in your yard, you can have a great looking landscape that's easier to care for and healthier for families, pets, wildlife and our great Northwest environment.

Recycle your yard waste by composting

Compost bin or backyard pile?

Choose an open pile or a bin. An open pile can be the easiest way to compost if you choose to let the pile sit and compost at its own rate. Composting in a covered bin keeps the composting material neatly contained and keeps in moisture more than an open pile. Be sure your covered bin is easy to move and rodent resistant. Place the bin or pile where it is easily accessible to you and your garden hose, and out of direct sunlight.

Want to buy a compost bin?

King County residents can buy a compost bin at a reduced price. Visit <http://composters.com/kingcounty>.

How long does it take to make to compost?

It can take from six months to two years, depending on conditions such as the amount of moisture and air, size and mix of materials and whether your bin is covered. Chopping or shredding wastes and keeping the

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Healthy soil acts like a:



sponge. It soaks up excess rainwater and slows runoff.



spigot. It releases water to plants as they need it, even between rainfalls.



filter. It traps urban pollutants like oil, metals, and pesticides as water percolates through it.



supermarket. It supplies valuable nutrients to plants.



Five Steps to: Natural Yard Care



King County
Department of
Natural Resources and Parks
Solid Waste Division



contents moist like a wrung out sponge will speed the composting process. In addition, turning the pile frequently with a pitchfork to mix ingredients provides air to the pile which helps the decomposition process.

Compost ingredients

Anything growing in your yard is potential food for tiny microbes and larger organisms such as millipedes and earthworms that act as decomposers. Carbon and nitrogen from the cells of dead plants and microbes fuel the decomposers' activities. Generally, brown materials such as fallen leaves and sawdust are high in carbon, while green materials such as grass clippings and weeds are high in nitrogen. As you toss together the yard waste in your composting pile or bin, strive for a mix of two parts carbon to one part nitrogen for the ideal composting mixture.

What about weeds?

Some seeds, roots and stem fragments can survive the composting process. If you don't want it in your finished compost – don't put it in your compost bin or pile.



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Now that it's done, how can I use my compost?

Compost can be used in a variety of ways:

As a mulch - spread a layer around trees and shrubs to prevent soil erosion, suppress weeds and reduce the need to water.

As a nutrient source - add to your flower and vegetable gardens, house plants, and planter boxes.

As a top dressing for lawns - sprinkle a thin layer over your lawn

in the spring and fall.

Note: When planting, do not place plants in pure compost. It's too rich in nutrients. Use compost to amend and improve the soil instead.

How much compost should I use?

Measure your planting area or lawn and consult with a nursery professional to determine the quantity of compost appropriate to your site. Sandy soil may require more compost than clay soil.

Yard waste	
Yes	No
Greens (Nitrogen) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grass clippings • Garden trimmings • Floral clippings • House plants and potting mix 	Treated Yard Waste <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clippings recently treated with "weed and feed" products or other herbicide • Moss treated with moss killer
Browns (Carbon) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Twigs and stalks • Deciduous leaves • Straw • Coarse untreated wood • Sawdust or shavings • Shredded paper, cardboard 	Diseased Plants
	Tenacious Or Noxious Weeds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morning glory • Dandelions • Weed seeds
	Thorny Plants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roses • Blackberries
	Evergreens/waxy Coated Plants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ivy • Rhododendrons • Evergreen needles and laurel
	Kitchen Scraps (Use A Worm Bin)
	Pet Feces

Yard waste compost troubleshooting

Symptom	Potential cause	Solutions
Smells like rotten eggs or garbage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pile is too wet • Food or pet waste in pile 	Turn pile and add leaves, straw, shredded newspaper.
Pile is dry inside.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough water • Too much woody material • Pile is too small 	Turn and moisten pile. Mix in fresh greens. Chop or remove excess woody material.
Pile is damp inside, but not composting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of greens 	Mix in fresh greens. Chop or remove excess woody material.
Pile has shrunk, but looks undecomposed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outside of pile is dry, but most of pile is probably composted 	Check inside the pile and remove any finished compost. Add materials to start a new batch of compost.
Smells like ammonia; clumps of slimy grass are present.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too much fresh grass 	Leave clippings on lawn, or mix in brown leaves and straw to the compost pile or bin.

Compost for healthy soil



Composting kitchen scraps



Composting kitchen scraps creates high-quality compost to enrich your soil and it reduces waste.

There are two ways to compost kitchen scraps:

Burying method – Shred any large food pieces, then bury the material at least eight inches below the surface of the ground to avoid problems with rodents, dogs, flies and odors. The covered holes become usable garden space the following season.

Worm bin method – A worm bin is a sturdy box made of wood or plastic that has a tight-fitting lid to keep pests out, ventilation holes to provide adequate air circulation, and drainage holes to release excess moisture.

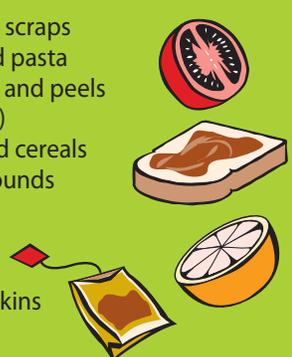
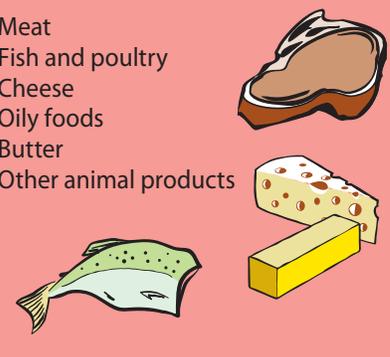
To compost in a worm bin, you need these things:

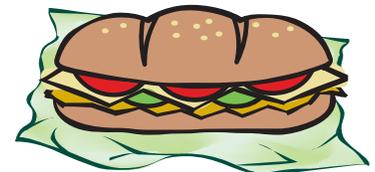
- worm bin
- redworms, also known as red wigglers
- bedding (pre-moistened shredded cardboard, non-waxy brown leaves or shredded newspaper)
- kitchen scraps

For information about worm composting, visit www.kingcounty.gov/soils and click on *Documents* or refer to the book *Worms Eat My Garbage* by Mary Applehof.

Other yard waste management options

You also can sign up for curbside yard waste collection and put your food scraps and food-soiled paper in your yard waste bin. This service now is available to 98 percent of single family residents in King County. You can add meat, bones and fish, cheese and dairy products, pizza boxes and other kinds of kitchen paper waste along with vegetable food scraps. Visit Solid Waste Division Web site www.kingcounty.gov/solidwaste and click on *Garbage and Recycling*, or contact your waste hauler for further information and to sign up.

Kitchen scraps	
Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vegetable scraps• Grains and pasta• Fruit rinds and peels (not citrus)• Breads and cereals• Coffee grounds and filters• Tea bags• Eggshells• Paper napkins 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meat• Fish and poultry• Cheese• Oily foods• Butter• Other animal products 



Resources

- The Garden Hotline 206-633-0224 help@gardenhotline.org for free advice on gardening, composting and other resource conservation topics
- Soil Building and Composting 206-296-4466 www.kingcounty.gov/soils
- Yard Talk, is a natural gardening show that demonstrates how to easily care for yards and gardens in a way that's good for people, pets, and the environment. Visit the web site to view episodes www.kingcounty.gov/yardtalk or see it on KCTV.



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Alternative Formats On Request
206-296-4466 • TTY Relay: 711
1-800-325-6165 ext. 6-4466



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