

COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ HOME COMPOSTING PROGRAM

Compost Troubleshooting Solutions to Common Compost Problems

Composting is like baking a cake — sometimes the recipe doesn't work, or the cake won't rise. Since composting is a natural process, it doesn't take much to work out the problem and take some simple steps to fix it. Some common compost problems and their solutions are listed below.

Four-legged creatures have been visiting my compost pile. What should I do?

First, make sure you are not adding meat, dairy products or greasy foods to your compost bin. Second, be sure to cover any other food scraps with a layer of leaves, soil or other brown material. Third, consider a rodent-resistant compost bin like the Earth Machine or the Biostack.

For a low-cost solution, consider modifying a garbage can for use as an animal-resistant bin for composting food scraps. For information on how to make and manage a garbage can composter, order a copy of the "Homemade Food Scrap Composter" flyer from the Rotline or download from the website.

I've got bugs in my compost pile. What should I do?

Absolutely nothing! Bugs, big and little, are what makes the decomposition happen. Tiny flies and ants can be pesky, see following questions.



I've got millions of tiny flies. What do I do?

The tiny flies are vinegar flies, which look just like fruit flies. To control them, or common black flies, cover your food scraps with a light layer of soil, then a layer (2 - 4 inches) of brown material (leaves, straw or stripped up newspaper).

There are ants in my compost pile. What should I do?

Large numbers of ants are usually an indication that the pile is too dry. To encourage them to leave the pile, moisten and turn it or stir it with a pitchfork to disrupt their colonies. Put a sticky barrier (household glue, sticky tape) on the handle of the pitch fork or shovel you are using to make it more difficult for the ants to crawl up the handle. After stirring the pile, leave it alone for a time to give the ants a chance to leave.



If there are many ants in your yard, they may return to the compost pile. But take heart! Ants may actually benefit the composting process by bringing fungi and other organisms into their nests. The work of ants can make compost richer in phosphorus and potassium by moving minerals from one place to another.

What do I do if my compost pile is too dry?

Materials in your compost bin should be as moist as a wrung-out sponge. When you squeeze a handful, no more than one or two drops of moisture drip out, but there should be sufficient moisture to hold the material together in a ball. Piles that are exposed to the air or the sun tend to dry out fairly rapidly. Try covering the pile with a plastic tarp to retain moisture.



If your compost pile is too dry, add water, but be sure to check if water is absorbed into the pile or just shed as it hits the pile. Frequently, watering a pile from above is ineffective because dry materials shed water. In this case, turn the pile by pulling it apart and restacking it, watering each layer.

If your pile is mainly composed of woody prunings, it may need more fresh green materials to moisten it and help it to retain moisture.

If you have a good balance of green materials and brown materials in your bin, but you did not add enough water originally, make a mental note for next time. Remember that the pile should be about 40 - 50% moisture — that's a lot of water.

What do I do if my backyard compost pile smells bad?

If the pile is compressed and lacks air space, turn it or mix it with a pitchfork and add some twigs and other materials that provide air space.

If the material is so wet that water drips out when you squeeze a handful, add more dry brown materials, like leaves, dried out weeds or soil, and mix thoroughly. If it is really wet, restack it completely and layer it with dry brown materials that provide air space to introduce air back into the pile. Loosen any clumps that have matted together.

If the pile has an ammonia odor, you have too much green material (grass clippings, food scraps, green plant material) and not enough brown (dry leaves, woody prunings, dried out plants). Add more brown material or soil.

If your compost includes succulent green materials like grass clippings and food scraps, be sure to cover them with a layer of leaves, dried out plants or weeds or a layer of soil. (Continued on reverse side)

My compost isn't getting hot. Why?

Many compost piles have too much brown material (dry leaves, woody prunings) and not enough green material (lawn clippings, vegetable and fruit scraps, manure). For a hot compost pile, brown materials must be shredded with a mower or chipped. Piles made on an add-as-you-go basis heat up very little even if they are high in green materials, as breakdown occurs incrementally. You can help a cool pile to heat up by mixing in blood meal, alfalfa hay, or horse or chicken manure. The main advantage of a hot pile is it composts faster and kills weed seeds if temperatures are maintained at 140 degrees F for three days. Maintaining a hot pile takes ongoing attention to aeration (turning), moisture, and the balance of green and brown materials.

If you don't have the time or inclination to maintain a hot pile, don't worry. Cold compost piles break down too! They just take a bit longer.

I had a worm bin but my worms died. What did I do wrong?

First of all, don't be discouraged. A worm bin is a biological system and it may take more than one try to get it right. The most common mistake is improper bedding or letting the bedding material dry out. It is very important to start with a four-inch layer of good bedding. For best results, mix rotted leaves with shredded paper. You can also add old compost and/or hay. If you don't have any of these materials handy, buy a block of compressed coconut fiber (sometimes called coco-pith) at the nursery. Bedding material should be a little moister than a wrung out sponge. You can add about an inch of food scraps to the top of the bin each week or two. Keep a two-inch layer of shredded non-glossy newspaper on top of the food.



To get off on the right foot with worms, sign up for a Hands-On Wormshop. Residents of the unincorporated area and Scotts Valley can get a free bin or purchase one below wholesale cost and buy worms at cost. Visit the website or call the Worm Doctor for a schedule or to reserve materials.

If you can't attend a Wormshop, order a copy of the Worm Composting brochure from the Rotline and check out "Worms Eat My Garbage," by Mary Appelhof, available at the Santa Cruz Public Libraries.

What is the absolute least amount of work I can get away with for a compost pile?

If you want to compost food scraps, there are two very easy methods.



- Modify a garbage can with a tight-fitting lid for use as an animal-resistant bin for composting food scraps. All you need to do is drill some holes in the bottom of the can for drainage, set it in a shallow hole so animals can't tip it over, and alternate layers of fruit and vegetable scraps with a one-inch layer of brown leaves or soil to control fruit flies and odors. Left alone, it will decompose in about 4-6 months. For complete information, order a copy of the "Homemade Food Scrap Composter" flyer from the Rotline or download from the website.

- Alternatively, you can bury food waste in empty spots in vegetable and flower gardens, where it will decompose and nourish your plants. For information on this method, order a copy of the "Burying Food Scraps" flyer from the Rotline or download from the website.



If you just want to compost yard trimmings, choose a spot at least two feet away from wooden structures such as a fence or building. As you accumulate yard wastes (not food), throw them on this pile. Turn your compost pile only when you have time (or not at all). Try to keep the compost as wet as a wrung out sponge (or just squirt it with water occasionally). The materials will shrink in volume and after six months to a year the bottom part of your pile will be rich, crumbly compost.

Learn more about composting
on-line at
www.compostsantacruzcounty.org

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