

Composting 101: Making Friends with Fungi and Bacteria

When I first moved to the West Coast from New York City, I thought anyone having a special bucket in their kitchen to collect scrap waste was *whacked out*. Growing up in a Manhattan high-rise, all my sisters and I knew about the art of garbage disposal was how fast we could toss an overfilled and dripping plastic bag down the garbage chute and escape from the dark sinister incinerator room. We didn't give a thought or actually care where our trash went because well, ... because we were New Yorkers!

Then I met my future husband Bill, one of those *whacked out* California environmentalists. He somehow succeeded in transforming a snobby uptown diva into his proselytizing compost queen. Last year we even went so far as to retrieve out of his sister's dumpster pile the "Compost Tumbler" that she was ready to dispose of. There we were driving home on a sunny Sunday morning, with the leaky, muddy, army-green compost-spinner rolling around in the back of our pick-up truck. We were in the cab laughing and singing the theme from "Green Acres" as if we had just scored a free flat screen color TV!

Why Compost?

As we all know, our landfills are filling up at an alarming rate. Composting is a responsible and efficient way to help the environment and your garden. Composting does great things for the earth and for YOU. Instead of disposing things like grass clippings, leaves, and kitchen waste, you can conserve all the plant nutrients they contain. Not only does it allow you to return something to tired and under-paid Mother Earth but you're also creating valuable soil additives to improve your home garden. Compost improves your soil texture and structure, supplies and helps retain nutrients, provides moisture and aeration, helps to control weeds, and reduces the need to buy expensive fertilizers and pesticides. *Trust me. The Dirt Diva's giving it to you straight! It's win-win Baby!*

What type of container is used for composting?

A simple pile in a corner of your yard will do fine but a container provides a more aesthetic appearance, speeds up decomposition and helps eliminate rodents. You could use chicken wire and make a circular wire pen or build a square container out of wood, which is what we initially did before we upgraded to the fancy Giant Tumbler. Add layers of compost materials almost to the top, then drive a stake into the middle to add air and water. *Voila!* Open the side of your container each time you "turn the pile" with either a shovel or pitchfork. A more permanent structure is one built from wood, plastic, cinder blocks, bricks or concrete. Proper moisture and good air circulation are most important and easy access to turning the pile is vital or else, *trust me again*, you'll find excuses not to turn the pile. If you turn your pile two times a week, you can decompose 10 times faster than a pile never turned. So, get to work!

My botanist pal, Dinah, from Sloat Nursery, is whom I often check my plant facts with. (She calls us, "The Granny and Annie Gardening Show.") "Granny" can advise you further on what type of compost container would work well with your available space.

What goes inside a compost pile?

Anything organic will decompose in your pile. Some common compostable materials are grass clippings, flowers, leaves, chicken or turkey manure, straw, soil, wood ashes, combined with kitchen scraps including fruit and vegetable peelings, eggshells, coffee grounds and tea bags. Never put in dairy products, meat, fish, or bones because they're difficult to breakdown and attract unwanted critters. Never compost anything that has been treated with a chemical pesticide or herbicide.

(Stay tuned for my upcoming article on “Integrated Pest Management”, a non-toxic or less toxic approach to managing your garden, coming in May.)

The microorganisms that control decomposition in your pile require both carbon and nitrogen in order to do their work. You will want a relatively equal amount of each along with adequate air and moisture, and it’s best to err on the carbon rich side. High carbon materials are referred to as “brown.” These include wood chips, dried leaves, sawdust and cornstalks. Materials that have a high Nitrogen content are called “green” and these include grass clippings, fresh leaves and cuttings, stems, manure and blood meal. The important thing is to keep your pile as moist as a damp sponge and to stir or mix it as often as possible to keep it aerated. Working 24/7 to break down your compost pile are macroorganisms like earthworms, mites, grubs, centipedes, flies, spiders, ants and beetles. Your finished product may take a few months to get to the dark, crumbly consistency of healthy compost, but keep persevering. One day you too will stand there proudly, pitchfork in hand, admiring your creation of nature and insist that your Park Avenue relatives smell and touch your glorious fresh soil.

For a brief moment they will look at you, worried and speechless.

Then pull out their cell phone and call your mother.

Expect a call twenty minutes later from your mom who will yell at you for using words like “fungi and bacteria” in the same sentence as “left-over lunch”, and for giving up her dream of your classical piano recital at Carnegie Hall.

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