

# Composting: Organic Alchemy

MARIANNE PETERS



**D**ecomposition is a powerful, inevitable process, and nothing on the planet—including us humans—is immune. Rot isn't exactly dinner table conversation, but composting—which is all about rot—is one of the most sustainable practices there is. After all, the earth itself composts, as leaves fall to the forest floor and form the layer of spongy loam called humus, which in turn nourishes the trees.

This spring I dug *last* spring's composted leftovers into my garden, effectively closing the loop and improving my soil at the same time. Unlike synthetic fertilizers, compost is good for the soil, its creatures, and the plants, too. It's a satisfying thing to return my scraps to the earth. I'm in step with creation, following its rhythms instead of carving out my own. I also feel like I'm being a good steward. Fifteen to 20 percent of landfill space in the U.S. is made up of compostable materials. The problem is that landfills function by sealing off garbage to prevent toxins leaking into the groundwater, yet, by doing that, they restrict both the moisture and air flow that waste-chomping microbes need to do their work. Contained organic wastes produce greenhouse gases such as methane, and they sometimes leak, contaminating the ground and local water sources. Many landfills no longer accept organic waste. So what is to be done with it?

Here's a solution—use it! If you want to start your own compost pile, there are many resources available. One

of the best websites is [www.compost-guide.com](http://www.compost-guide.com). It's actually a very straightforward process: you pile up waste, add moisture, turn it frequently, and eventually the center of the pile heats up and begins to decompose (it's called "cooking" in the lingo). You keep turning the pile until it has cooked down into a rich, crumbly, dark brown substance, not unlike soil. It's like organic alchemy, transforming kitchen and yard waste into a nutrient-filled soil amendment.

Build your pile by placing a six- to eight-inch layer of moistened organic material, such as grass clippings, directly on the ground in a sunny, well-drained location. (I have a small compost bin outside my back door for kitchen scraps, and a larger one in the backyard for leaves and yard clippings.) Place a similar layer of manure over that, and then add a third layer of garden soil over the manure. Nearby farms are good sources for aged manure. Town dwellers can buy manure by the bag. Alternate these layers until the pile is at least three feet tall, or until your container is about three-fourths full.

A "clean" compost pile is practically odorless, except for an earthy scent. However, what you add to the pile could cause a foul stench, so follow a few general rules. Don't add anything greasy, meaty, or fatty. Besides creating a smell, you'll also attract pests. Also avoid putting the following in your compost: dairy items, pet feces, weeds that have already gone to seed, beans or

hot peppers, or anything non-organic (plastics or metals).

Do add anything else that is organic, such as fruit and vegetable scraps, grass clippings (avoid clippings treated with herbicides), egg shells, grains, tea bags, coffee grounds and filters, leaves, wood chips, weeds that haven't gone to seed, used paper towels and napkins, and hair.

Chop up larger items—this creates more surface area for the bacteria to work and the material breaks down faster. Turn the pile frequently with a shovel or a pitchfork to combine all the materials, keeping it as damp as a wrung-out washcloth—you may have to hose it down during the heat of summer. A frequently-turned, well-cared-for pile makes compost in as short a time as two months.

Churches are large contributors to the waste stream, but imagine the impact if Christian communities committed to reducing their landfill contributions. How? Teach and demonstrate composting in Sunday school classes. Educate people about their local trash-hauling and disposal services—often folks have never even considered how much waste they produce and where it eventually ends up.

I love to see new life in the garden. However, there's also something fulfilling about rot, especially when I know I'm participating in a natural process of death and renewal where nothing is wasted. □

Marianne Peters is a freelance writer living in Plymouth, Indiana.