



Build a Compost Bin

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Veteran gardeners swear by compost. It's great for adding to their garden to help transplants along and to keep soil healthy. Plus, it's an environmentally smart way to turn household waste into something besides a bulge in your garbage bag. If you're the lazy type, starting a compost heap can be thought of as piling stuff that will eventually rot, then waiting for it to ferment. But if you have any aesthetic sense, building a compost bin is in order.

Tools & Materials Checklist

- Wood for the bin's frame
- Wire mesh or wood for the bin's walls
- Drills, screwdriver & screws to build frame
- Metal clippers for the mesh (if used)
- Metal hinges or latches for the removable wall
- Manure
- Fertilizer
- Pitchfork or shovel

1. Choose a Location

Choose a site that's level and shady, has good drainage and allows easy access to wheelbarrows, garden paths and hose hookups.

2. Select Building Materials

A compost bin has three permanent walls and one that's removable, allowing you to "turn," or mix, the materials within the bin. Whether you use wire mesh or wooden slats for the walls, you must have aeration to speed the decomposition process, so don't build anything airtight. If you decide to use wood in the bin be sure to purchase cedar or cypress wood because they will better resist the decaying effect from the bin's contents.

3. Bin Dimensions

Commonly, gardeners build two bins with a shared middle wall: one bin to store already composted materials; the other for material that's still composting. Bins tend to be three feet wide by three feet long, and three- to four-feet high. There's no need for a top; moisture's a good thing because it speeds up the decomposition process.

4. Layer Compost Materials

Once you've built the bin, start by laying in a foot or so of material. You want a mix of fresh green lawn clippings, weeds & sod and inert materials such as bone meal, sawdust & shredded paper. Next, put in a layer of manure or fertilizer, followed by an inch of topsoil. Repeat these layers until the bin is filled.

5. Mix the Material

After about three weeks have passed, take the removable wall down and use a shovel or pitchfork to mix the material. Throw fertilizer on top of the mixture of compost. About two weeks later repeat the process. Forget to turn it? No problem, it will just take longer to decompose. If it seems too dry, just hose it down. Once it's turned a uniform brown, crumbles to the touch and is nearly odorless, it's all set for spreading.

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