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# virginia home food production



## FACT SHEET

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### BUILDING A COMPOST PILE

#### Making Compost

Composting is a disintegration process caused by bacteria and fungus organisms. This results in a considerable reduction in bulk which may be helpful if you have large amounts of organic refuse and a relatively small garden. There is usually no objectionable odor during the process when layers of soil are added to the pile. When thoroughly decayed, there is little possibility of disease or insect problems from using compost.

If you desire to make compost regularly, it will be helpful to construct 2 long bins out of planks or concrete blocks. Make the bins about 4 feet wide, 4 feet high, as long as desired, and open at one end. Plant refuse may be accumulated in one bin while the composting process is taking place in the other.

Start your compost pile with a 6 inch layer of leaves, straw, weeds, or other plant material you have available. Coarse weeds and corn stalks should be cut into pieces about 8 inches long. Sprinkle 1 cupful of 5-10-5 or 5-10-10 fertilizer per square yard on top of this plant material.

If you prefer to use an organic fertilizer, scatter 5 pints of 1-1-1 dried manure on each layer of organic material. If an alkaline compost is desired, add 1 pint of ground limestone per square yard of surface area. Add a layer of soil about 1 inch thick to supply the fungus and bacteria organisms needed to cause the composting to occur.

Repeat the layers of plant material, fertilizer, and soil as many times as needed to use all the leaves or plant refuse you have available. The top should be lower in the center to cause water to move into the pile rather than to run off. The use of compost activator compounds is not necessary.

Water the pile as often as necessary to maintain a relatively high moisture content, which promotes decomposition. The pile should be forked over after about 3 months. The plant materials should decompose into good compost in about 4 or 5 months in warm weather, but may take longer under cool or dry conditions. Composting may be completed in 1 or 2 months if the materials are shredded, kept moist, and turned several times to provide good aeration.

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A plastic trash bag may be used to make a small quantity of compost from relatively fine material such as leaves, lawn clippings, or chopped garden refuse. Make layers of plant trash, fertilizer, and soil as in a compost pile. Add 2 quarts of water to dry material, and 1 quart if it is quite moist or succulent. Tie the bag and turn every few weeks to cause the moisture to move back and forth through the organic material.

Sheet composting is another method of making compost. A layer of organic materials about 3-4 inches is spread over the soil, then covered with a 2 inch layer of soil. The organic material is allowed to decay at least three months prior to cultivating. Sheet composting on an unused portion of your garden in the fall can provide an enriched area for spring planting.

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