

How would you like to have something called “black gold” for your yard and garden that provides fertilizer, cuts down on the need to water, and reduces landfill costs? And better yet, it’s free! Mother Nature makes its own compost when plants die, decay, and return to the earth, forming the top layer of soil. We can use the same process in our back yards by setting up a compost pile. All it takes is some sort of bin (homemade or store-bought) and the basic ingredients of compost: brown yard waste, green yard waste, water, and air.

**The Compost Bin** – There are many commercial compost bins of every imaginable design, but you can easily make one yourself by using fence posts and hardware cloth or chicken wire, or left over fencing or wooden pallets. The key is to allow air to enter the compost pile and to leave one side open to make it easier to turn the pile and scoop out the finished compost. A bin that is about 4 by 4 feet is the right size. You can make two or more bins to have compost developing at various stages. A website with bin designs is [www.CompostBinPlans.com](http://www.CompostBinPlans.com).

**Making Compost** – There are “formulas” for making the perfect compost, but who has time for that? Take the lazy approach and toss in a mixture of brown yard waste – dried leaves, twigs, wood chips, sawdust, shredded paper; green yard waste – plant clippings, dead annuals and flowers; and kitchen waste such as fruit and vegetable peels, coffee grounds (including the filters), and egg shells. While you can use grass clippings, it is better to leave them on the lawn to add nutrients and cut down on the need for lawn fertilizer. Never use meat, seafood, or dairy products in the compost pile, as these will attract animals. Don’t add weeds that have gone to seed or plant materials that are diseased or have been sprayed with pesticides. If you can add some soil (old potting soil works great), a little bit of manure (horse or cow only), or existing compost, that will jump start the process. Water the pile periodically and turn it every few weeks with a pitch fork. Or, continue the lazy gardener’s approach and let rain do the watering and don’t turn the pile. A compost pile that is left to fend for itself will be ready in one to two years. A pile that is turned and watered regularly may be ready in several months. You will know the compost is ready to use when it has turned a dark brown color, is crumbly like soil, and smells like rich earth.

Sift out any remaining large chunks such as corncobs.

**Using Compost** – Gardeners call compost

“black gold” because it really does help plants grow. Compost has nutrients and microorganisms plants need to thrive, and acts like a sponge to absorb and hold water. Compost can be added as top dressing to existing flower beds or tilled into new vegetable gardens. Spread compost as a thin layer over lawns, which will give the grass a boost of nutrients and improve the soil’s water holding ability. If you have clay or sandy soil, adding compost will improve its texture. Sifted compost can also be used in potting mixes.

**Hole Composting for the Really Lazy Gardener** – If you don’t have the room or energy for a compost pile, you can use hole composting in your flower or vegetable beds. In the garden, dig a hole about 10 inches wide and deep. Back in the kitchen, use a kitchen blender or food processor to grind up kitchen scraps (but no meat or dairy) with a cup of water. Once blended, take the mixture outside and dump it in the hole. Add a little soil back into the hole to get the microbes working. Once that hole is filled with kitchen scraps, start another hole somewhere else.

The EPA estimates that more than 25 % of landfill space is taken up by yard and kitchen waste. By composting at home, you will be doing good for your yard and garden, helping to save precious landfill space, and doing good for the earth! A website for learning more details about composting is [www.HowToCompost.org](http://www.HowToCompost.org).

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Example of a home-made, two-bin compost bin in use in Suburban Acres.