



Home Composting: As Easy as...1, 2, 3

1) Composting has been called “mother nature’s way of recycling”. Although composting operations can be quite complex, getting a backyard composting system up and running is a piece of cake. After all, composting – the decomposition (or breaking down) of natural materials – is already happening all around us. Marion County’s moist climate and moderate weather provide ideal conditions for turning those vegetable scraps and yard debris into high quality, productive compost. So relax and don’t let the process intimidate you...it’s fun!

Leaves, grass clippings, vegetable scraps, and other compostables will naturally break down on their own. A composter, however, helps to manage the appropriate moisture level, keeps the pile warmer, prevents unwanted pests, and is a little more attractive in your backyard. Save money and put some of those old materials that you have laying around in the garage to use by constructing your own composter, or buy one through the Marion County Public Works – Environmental Services’ Composters at Cost Program. The County purchases and sells composters at or below cost through local businesses. This means that you can save about 50% off of the normal retail price.

There are many composters out there. If you have a large yard, you may want to construct you own three-bin system. The Marion County Public Works – Environmental Services can provide you with construction designs. If you have an average sized yard, you can purchase a bin for \$44 - \$60 through the Composters at Cost Program. If you do not have a yard, so the only compostable items that you produce are fruit and vegetable scraps, then worm composting may be for you. Red wiggly worms are extremely efficient at turning kitchen scraps into highly valuable soil. Worm bins are \$51, but as with all of the composter options mentioned above, it is easy to construct them for little or no money.

2) Once you have selected a composter, the next step is to begin adding material. The key to being a good composter is to think of yourself as a bug farmer. Bacteria, fungi, protozoans, centipedes, millipedes, beetles and worms are the ones doing all of the work, so you need to keep them happy. These organisms – numbering as many as a million in each handful of compost – need the same basic things that we do to survive.

Like us, your compost critters need food. They like grass clippings, flowers, annual weeds, fruits and vegetables, coffee and tea filters, leaves, chopped twigs, straw, wood ash, shredded paper, sawdust, and most other types of organic material. There are some things that are not appropriate for backyard composting. Think of organisms in your compost pile as vegans; do not add meat, cheese, bones, milk, pet feces, or any other items that contain animal by-products. You should also avoid putting in grease, oily foods, diseased plants, weeds with seeds, invasive weeds, or charcoal ash. Eggshells are one of the only animal products that work well in backyard compost piles.

Like you, the compost organisms need balanced meals. All organic materials contain carbon and nitrogen in varying ratios. Carbon in brown leaves and woody waste provides energy, while nitrogen in green grass and vegetable scraps provides protein for cell development. Adding a good mix of material gives the balance the microorganisms need to quickly break down your compost pile.

Water, a basic necessity for all life, is also required for a productive compost pile...but not too much of it! If compost piles become too wet, they can turn anaerobic, which slows down the process and can lead to unpleasant odors. If this occurs, simply add straw, leaves, or even newspaper to absorb the extra moisture. Ideally, your compost should feel like a wrung out sponge. When you pick up a handful and squeeze it hard, you should be able to get it to release a small drop of water.

3) Oxygen, another necessity for animals, is also required by the little compost creatures. About once a week you should turn your compost pile and thereby add oxygen. The Urban Tumbler, a \$60 model sold through the Composters at Cost Program, makes it easy to turn the compost pile. Most systems, however, require a pitchfork or some other tool to mix up and turn the pile.

And viola, you now have the basics for beginning a compost pile in your own backyard. How quickly you are able to convert vegetable scraps and yard

debris depends on a number of interrelated factors. It could take as little as 5-6 weeks, or as long as 5-6 months. The best way to find out is to simply begin! If you have any questions about composting, or if you would like to check out a book on the topic, call Marion County Public Works – Environmental Services at (503) 588-5169. The Department also has free guides on composting, worm composting, worm suppliers, natural gardening, alternatives to household hazardous waste and more.