

COMPOST U



Compost U: A Girl Scout Gold Award Project in partnership with the Montgomery County Food Council's [Environmental Impact Working Group](#) to educate Montgomery County residents on the benefits and basics of composting.

August 2019

Frequently Asked Questions

What is compost?

Compost is a dark, crumbly, earthy-smelling soil amendment produced by the natural decomposition of organic plant materials.

What is composting?

Composting is a decomposition process. Organic material, such as food and plant material, gradually become compost when microorganisms, bugs and worms eat the organic material. Ideal composting conditions occur when microorganisms have an adequate mix of plant material, and enough air and water to live, eat, and reproduce.

Why should I compost?

Compost has many benefits, including that it:

- Improves soil structure, texture, and fertility so plants and lawns thrive.
- Improves water retention and reduces stormwater runoff.
- Reduces lawn and garden care costs by minimizing the need to purchase commercial fertilizers.
- Reduces waste (food waste is about 20% of residential waste).
- Reduces greenhouse gas emissions from landfills and incineration.
- Protects waterways by slowing runoff from rain and melting snow.
- Prevents soil erosion and traps sediment.
- Renews soil, by adding healthy microbes, bugs and worms.
- Maintains carbon levels in the soil and protects our climate.

How is my trash, including food waste, currently disposed of in Montgomery County?

Currently, Montgomery County incinerates residential waste. In this process, waste is transported to the [Covanta Resource Recovery Facility](#), an incinerator located in Dickerson, MD.

Where can I get a FREE compost bin for my yard trimmings in Montgomery County?

See the [“Compost Bin Pickup Locations”](#) flyer for more information on free bins from Montgomery County, or visit:

<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/sws/composting/bins.html> to find a location near you.

Does compost smell bad?

No, a well-maintained compost pile will not smell. It’s important to keep your compost material well balanced. Microbes like to be fed a recipe of three buckets of “browns,” such as leaves or wood chips, to one bucket of “greens,” such as green leaves or plants (see below for more information on green and brown material). If your composting pile smells, then it probably has too much water or “greens” and you should add more “browns,” or you can try turning or stirring it to add more air.

Does composting attract rodents?

The free compost bins provided by Montgomery County are designed for yard trimmings, which will not attract rodents. If you want to compost food waste, it must be in a rodent proof container. Preventive measures include:

- Using compost containers such as:
 - Box frame bins made with ¼ inch thick hardware cloth, and a lid, that are raised about 6 inches off the ground, with a gravel base underneath.
 - Metal tumblers and properly maintained plastic bins.
- Use a rodent proof bin and best practice management for food scrap composting. Ensure there is at least two feet of space between the food scrap composting container and any walls and fences, in order to deter rodents from establishing pathways and nests.

What can I compost?

A mix of organic/plant “green” and “brown” materials are the best for feeding the microbes, bugs and worms in the compost pile.

Green materials are nitrogen-rich, and include:

- Fruit and vegetable scraps (fresh and uncooked are best)

- Fresh plant trimmings
- Flowers
- Grass clippings

Brown materials are carbon-rich materials, and include:

- Fall leaves
- Cotton rags
- Sawdust from untreated wood
- Straw
- Wood chips
- Paper (such as lawn bags)

Avoid: Cat and dog manure, dairy and meat, weeds with seeds, diseased plants, wood ashes. Dog and cat manure can contain pathogens and diseases dangerous to humans. Dairy and meat can attract animals. Weeds with seeds can sprout in the pile. Wood ashes can be too alkaline.

What if I don't have any "Browns" to use in my compost?

Some types of "green" plant material will turn to a "brown." For example, you can "stockpile" browns by saving your leaves in the fall, or making a pile of browns to use throughout the summer and fall for your compost.

Can I compost my weeds?

You can compost weeds directly without seeds on them. If you have weeds with seeds, or you're not sure if they have seeds, put the weeds in a black plastic bag and "solarize" them by placing them in a sunny spot for 6 to 8 weeks to kill any seeds.

How long does it take to make compost and how can I speed it up?

Slow/cold composting can take about a year to 18 months. For this method, you just add organic material to your composting system during the growing season and let it sit to decompose.

If you want to speed up the process, use the "hot method" of composting, which involves more management, such as turning or stirring the material, checking and adjusting moisture levels, and adjusting the materials by adding more browns or greens when necessary. Remember the microbes like a ratio of three "browns" to one "green" for their food. When turning a pile, you move "cool" exterior composting materials to the

“hot” microbe-rich interior of the pile. Turning the composting pile also allows for air to get into the pile.

For the “hot method,” compost should ideally be turned and watered every 3-4 days for 2-3 weeks. After 2-3 weeks, let the compost “cook” for about 6 to 8 weeks until it is completely decomposed and ready to use.

Do I need to “water” the pile?

Yes! Microorganisms need water to live and eat plant material, so the pile should be kept damp. The materials in a properly moist composting system should feel like a damp sponge, and should stick together when you grab some and squeeze it. However, too much water prevents air flow and creates odor, so make sure to add “brown” material like leaves, or turn the pile to dry the compost if it is too wet.

Where should I put my compost bin or pile?

Bins or piles can be located in direct sunlight or shade, however, if placed in a sunny location, the compost bin will need to be monitored more often for adequate moisture. The bin or pile should be close to water sources, convenient for use, on level surfaces with good drainage, and with a foot of space between the bin and any walls, fences, and property lines.

How large should my bin or pile be?

The recommended size of the compost pile is at least 3 x 3 x 3 feet. At this volume, the pile is able to hold heat in, but is not so large that it cannot be turned or aerated easily.

When is the compost ready?

Compost is ready when it is dark brown in color, crumbly, similar temperature to outside, and is earthy, or sweet-smelling. Additionally, the compost pile should have shrunk to about half of its starting volume.

If I can't or don't want to compost, what are some composting alternatives?

There are a variety of curbside collection services for food scraps that are available in Montgomery County. Businesses like [Compost Crew](#) and [Veteran Compost](#) offer weekly curbside compost pickups, along with bins, bags, and free compost for a set price per month or year.

The Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection also offers curbside collection of yard trim materials from single-family residences. Yard trim materials

collected through the County's residential curbside recycling collection program, as well as those materials collected by private collectors, landscape contractors, and lawn care service providers from individuals, businesses, and multi-family properties, are transported to the Montgomery County Shady Grove Processing Facility and Transfer Station in Derwood.

At the Transfer Station, brush is ground and chipped into mulch and made available for residents to pick-up for personal use. Grass and leaves are transported to the Montgomery County Composting Facility, where the material is composted. The end product, produced through the composting process, is a high-quality soil amendment, which is marketed and sold under the name Leafgro®. For locations for purchasing Leafgro, visit: <https://leafgro.menv.com/retailers.html>.

What if I want to use compost, but don't make it or don't make enough to use?

Most hardware stores and nurseries sell compost or compost blends (with potting soil or top soil). LeafGro is also a good alternative soil amendment to use to build your soil health.

Sources:

- ["Aiming for Zero Waste: A Vision for Sustainable Materials Management in Montgomery County."](#) (Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection)
- ["Backyard Composting."](#) (University of Maryland)
- ["Community Composting Done Right: A Guide to Best Management Practices"](#). (Brenda Platt, Linda Bilsens Brolis: Institute for Local Self-Reliance. March 2019)
- ["Compost."](#) (Sustainable UMD, University of Maryland)
- [Compost Bin Pickup Locations.](#) (Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection)
- [The Compost Crew](#)
- ["Composting."](#) (Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection)
- *"Composting is easy!"* (Susan Eisendrath, MPH; Montgomery County Master Gardeners, University of Maryland Extension)
- ["Composting: Your Way to a Natural Fertilizer."](#) (Montgomery County, Maryland Division of Solid Waste Services Waste Reduction and Recycling Section)
- ["Composting Impacts More Than You Think."](#) (Institute for Local Self-Reliance)
- ["Montgomery County Resource Recovery Facility."](#) (Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection)
- ["Yes! In My Backyard: A Home Composting Guide for Local Government."](#) (Brenda Platt, Institute for Local Self-Reliance)
- ["Backyard Composting."](#) (Lewis Shell, Home and Garden Information Center University of Maryland Extension)
- [Strategic Plan to Advance Composting, Compost Use, and Food Scraps Diversion in Montgomery County, Maryland.](#) (Montgomery County, Maryland Department of

Environmental Protection Division of Solid Waste Services Waste Reduction and
Recycling Section)