

Top 10 Mistakes Gardeners Make with Compost Piles!

by Rob Lucey

Harris County Master Gardeners

Composting is not difficult but there are a few things you need to know NOT to do to have a successful compost mixture. According to Harris County Master Gardener, Rob Lucey, here are the Top Ten things to avoid when composting.

10. Weed seeds. After tidying up your garden, it's convenient to toss everything onto your compost pile. But if you've pulled up pernicious weeds with seeds, those seeds might not be fully neutralized by the composting process. Then you'd just be planting a new crop of weeds when you spread your compost.

9. Spreading disease. Certain garden diseases, such as fungi affecting tomato and squash plants, can survive the composting process. If you have a diseased plant, it should go into the trash rather than your compost pile.

8. Missing the microbes. For a new compost pile, you can speed things up by adding layers of soil, "old" compost, or manure which provides the workers for breaking down plant materials.

7. Dying of thirst. All of those microorganisms dining on your garden scraps need a bit of moisture to keep working. During dry spells, sprinkle a bit of water on top before turning your pile but don't soak your pile so much that the microbes drown.

6. Being too cool. A good compost pile should generate heat when all of the microbes are hard at work. If yours isn't working, it might need a boost of nitrogen. Add fresh grass clippings, fresh manure or blood meal. Another problem may be that the pile isn't large enough to reach critical mass. Keep adding layers and you'll get there.



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5. Not shredding and chipping. Leaves, hedge clippings, newspapers and other bulky items break down very slowly if you don't provide a head start by mulching them first.

4. Adding pet feces. If you have a pet chicken, cow, horse, goat or other vegetarian species, their manure is a great source of nitrogen for your compost. But cat or dog feces are a no-no, decomposing slowly and carrying disease organisms.

3. Not mixing in enough "brown" and "green." Ideally, you'll alternate equal layers of brown material (such as dry leaves, sawdust or wood chips) and green material (grass clippings, manure and food scraps).

2. Failing to let the mix breathe. If you don't have air entering from the sides of your compost container and/or turn it frequently, it can get compacted so that the microbes and "bugs" breaking down your material don't get the air they need to do their job.

And the NUMBER ONE composting mistake...

1. Adding animal products such as grease, fat, meat trimmings or dairy products. They break down slowly, smell unpleasant when decomposing and can attract pests. (Eggshells are fine and help add calcium to your end product.)