Composting 101

Open Air Composting

Open-air composting can be done successfully without any type of container. If no container will be used, locating the pile against a block wall or other structure will help with moisture retention and in building up the ideal pile volume.

Composting bins can be made at home, or there are many commercial models to choose from. Whichever type is used, it is helpful to have two bins, so while one batch is "curing" another can be started. Following are some features to keep in mind when building or purchasing a bin:

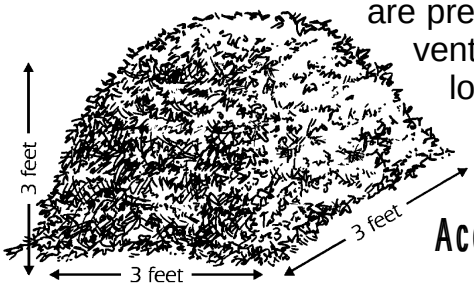
- *Volume*
- *Ventilation*
- *Access for Pile Turning*
- *Rodent Resistance*
- *Construction*

Volume

The ideal volume of a compost pile is between 3' squared (3x3x3) to 5' squared (5x5x5). The volume of many commercial compost bins is smaller than is optimum.

Ventilation

In dry climates bins that have features which help retain moisture are preferred. Plastic or wooden sides with slits or holes for ventilation work well. Wire mesh allows more moisture loss. Plastic or wooden lids are also important in reducing moisture loss. A tarp can also be thrown over a pile to help retain moisture.



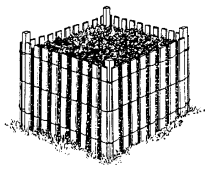
Access for Pile Turning

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA UC CE **COOPERATIVE EXTENSION**

Placer County
11477 E Avenue *(Bldg 306, DeWitt Center)*
Auburn, California 95603
(530) 889-7385
FAX (530) 889-7397
E-Mail: ceplacer@ucdavis.edu

Nevada County
255 So Auburn *(Veterans Memorial Building)*
Grass Valley, California 95945
(530) 273-4563
FAX (530 273-4769
E-Mail: cenevada@ucdavis.edu

If finished compost is desired in a relatively short amount of time, it will be important to be able to turn the compost pile regularly. Therefore, a bin which allows easy access is best. The ideal system includes a series of bins, such as the three-bin turning unit, for processing compost at different stages of decomposition. Barrels or drums are also used, mounted either vertically or horizontally for easy turning. Bins that have one side open, a hinged panel, or can be taken apart, moved, and put back together, also allow easy turning. If compost can be produced over a longer period of time, then access for turning is not as critical. "Holding units" is the name given to bins used to keep decomposing materials in an organized way until they break down, with little or no maintenance. Turning the compost in holding units is often difficult, unless a special aerating tool is used. These tools are poked down into the center and pulled up.

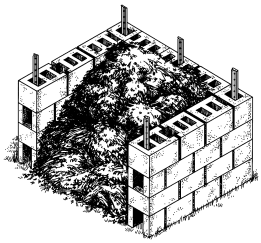


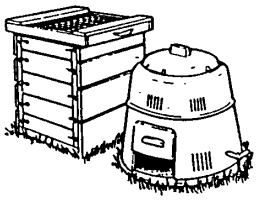
Rodent-Resistance

If a rodent-resistant bin is desired, be sure it has a tight-fitting lid, a floor, and no holes or gaps larger than 1/4 inch. A wood or wire mesh floor can be attached to the bin or the bin can rest on paving stones, cement, brick or wood. Existing compost bins can be modified by totally enclosing them in 1/4 inch wire mesh.

Construction

Composting bins made from reused or recycled materials are preferred. Fortunately, many composting bins on the market are made from recycled plastic. Be sure to ask. If building your own bin, seek out sources of used lumber. Wooden pallets can be used whole as sides of a bin, or can be dismantled, and the wood used in the construction of a new bin. Used cinder blocks also make good compost bins.





Rodent Resistant