

Homemade Food Scrap Composter

Properly composted food scraps are an excellent soil conditioner for gardens. However, composting food scraps in an open pile or mixed with yard waste can attract some unwanted urban pests—rats, mice, raccoons and possums! Here's how to easily make your own pest-resistant food scrap composter that avoids that problem.

Making the Composter and Getting Started

One of the simplest ways to compost food scraps is in a garbage can. Two cans will be needed so they can be used in rotation, allowing the food scraps in one to 'cook' while the other is being filled. The cans should have tight-fitting lids. Metal cans are best, as they are more resistant to critters. Drill about 10 quarter-inch drain holes in the bottom of each can. Then drill 10 air holes in the sides of each can, spaced about two-inches from the top rim.

Stockpile a supply of material for covering the food scraps near the composters. Cover material can be fallen leaves, soil, compost or sawdust (available free from woodworkers and cabinet shops).

If there is a possibility that pets or varmints will tip the cans over, they should be sunk into the earth. Dig holes 5-15 inches deep (depending upon the strength of the animals) in a well-drained corner of your yard and set the cans into the holes. Then push the soil back in around the sides. Your new composters are ready to use!

Add Food Scraps and Cover

Start off your first can by putting food scraps in the bottom. Add food scraps to the can as often as you like. Each time you add food, cover with about an inch of fallen leaves, soil, compost, or sawdust to control odors and discourage fruit flies.

Do Compost

- Vegetable scraps
- Grains and pasta
- Fruit rinds & peels
- Breads & cereals
- Coffee grounds & filters
- Tea bags
- Egg shells and cartons
- Paper napkins & towels

Do Not Compost

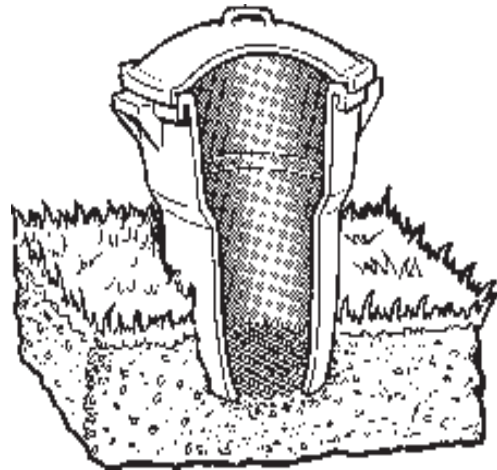
- Meat
- Fish & poultry
- Cheese
- Oily foods
- Butter
- Other animal products

Rotating the Cans

Depending on your household's food habits, the first can will fill in 4-8 months. The compost will need 4-6 months to 'cook' before it can be used on your garden. Fill up the second can while the first can is 'cooking' (decomposing).

Harvesting the Compost

When the first can has 'cooked' for 4-6 months, the material inside should look like soil. Worms may have moved in to finish the composting! Dump the can, and let the compost age for 2-3 months in the open air before using it in your garden. This allows the compost to dry out a bit so beneficial aerobic organisms can move in.



Using the Compost

Use the compost as a mulch, applying a 1-inch layer around established plants. Or, place a 1-2 inch layer in an area to be planted, and dig it in with a shovel or pitchfork.

Problems?

Here are some common problems and how to fix them.

• Odors and fruit flies

Add another 1-2 inches of fallen leaves, soil, compost or sawdust to exclude the fruit flies and filter the odors. Always keep the lid closed.

• Raccoons or dogs knock the lid off

Put a heavy object on the lid or secure it with a bungee cord. And be sure to keep meat waste out! It smells bad and attracts animals, so it is better put in the garbage.

Learn more about composting and order publications online at

www.compostsantacruzcounty.org

**Questions about Composting with Worms?
Call the Worm Doctor, (831) 427-3452**

**General Questions about Home Composting?
Call the Rotline, (831) 423-HEAP (4327)**



The Home Composting Program is sponsored by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors and produced by Santa Cruz County Department of Public Works Recycling and Solid Waste Services

