Backyard Composting Webinar Q&A

City of Dunedin and Pinellas Community Compost

Questions answered by Amanda Streets

Question: How much / how little water should I be adding weekly to keep my compost moist?

Answer: It depends on your compost. It should be at 60% moisture. You can test this by squeezing your compost in your hand. It should feel like a wrung-out sponge. When you squeeze it, you want a few tiny drops of water to emerge from between your fingers and the compost to clump together like playdough or clay when you open your hand. If it's too dry, it will fall apart like powder. Add water, turn, wait and repeat until the compost is rehydrated. Too wet and water will pour out. Add browns and turn to soak up some excess liquid; cover during rain and uncover during the sun to allow some water to evaporate.

Question: I don't have enough browns to compost, where can I get extra browns?

Answer: There are free mulch pick up sites located around Pinellas County. You can also use shredded paper, white copy paper, fiber egg cartons, newspaper, and brown cardboard as browns. Asking friends or neighbors for their clean raked and bagged leaves is also an option.

Question: In a small backyard, how can you maintain a compost pile?

Answer: Many people with a small backyard like to use a tumbler or other container type compost system. If you have a shady area (not sunny at all) a worm bin can be placed outdoors too.

Question: Are there any kinds of weeds that would keep growing if added to the compost?

Answer: Weeds that are not obnoxious or invasive can be composted as long as they don't have seeds. You want to avoid composting Bermuda grass.

Question: Is paper with writing okay? Newspaper? Cereal boxes? Paper with ink?

Answer: Paper with writing or print is okay, yes. Newspaper is okay to compost as well. Most ink is soy based and is safe to compost. Avoid glossy or colored paper and cardboard. Cereal boxes, diaper boxes, and milk cartons should not be composted.

Question: Is it possible to bury non-meat and non-dairy kitchen scraps directly in the ground about a foot deep? If we chop everything up before we dig?

Answer: It is possible to bury plant based food scraps about a foot deep. Be sure to bury it deep enough and cover it well. Keep in mind that with this method of composting, people are not usually moving that compost to other locations. It's buried in the location where the compost will stay so plan accordingly.

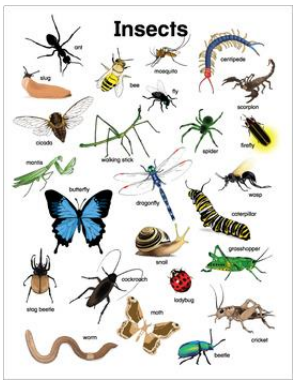
Question: Can Spanish Moss be composted? Is this considered a green or a brown?

Answer: Yes. It would be a green if it is composted while living and a brown if it is dead. All materials have some nitrogen (green) and some carbon (brown). If you aren't sure if something is a green or a brown ask yourself if it is dry, dead and came from a plant that went dormant or died, or if it was harvested when the plant was living. Living plants are higher in nitrogen (green).

Question: Are flies bad?

Answer: Yes and no. Black flies, house flies and fruit flies are usually an indication that your compost is smelly and needs either more browns or for the browns to cover the top and sides of your compost more completely. If they lay eggs and their larva (maggots) are in your compost, that's okay. They are doing their job in nature. Black soldier fly larva in your compost is desired and good.

They are also doing their job in nature and are not an indication that you need to change the amount of browns that you are using.



Question: How about worms, spiders, slugs, roaches, palmetto bugs? Are there any "bad bugs or insects" for your compost bin?

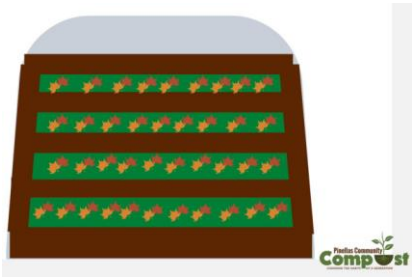
Answer: Bad bugs – not really. All insects and creepy crawlies have a valued and unique role to play in an ecosystem. You're providing the appropriate habitat for insects to flourish and do their job. I do remove grubs from my compost prior to using it as grubs do eat plant roots.

Question: What can you use to sift through the compost with? And you can buy this at a dollar store?

Answer: You can purchase a low cost wire mesh trash can. The kind I mentioned are about a foot tall and fit inside a 5 gallon bucket. You can use this to sift the larger pieces of brown materials out of your compost.

Question: Can you add soil from potted plants? If so, is that considered a green or a brown?

Answer: Yes. Used potting soil would be considered a brown.



Question: Where would you put your high nitrogen manures into your bin?

Answer: You would evenly distribute high nitrogen materials throughout your compost bin.

When you're making a compost bin, you actually want more of a mixture rather than layers. Try to line the bottom, top and sides of your compost bin with browns.

Question: Can I compost roots of pulled out plants?

Answer: Yes, as long as they aren't diseased or invasive.

Question: Can I compost pine needles from my pine trees?

Answer: Yes. They are browns. They will take a while to compost though.

Question: Is a closed tumbler system quicker than an open pile?

Answer: No, not necessarily. An open system has the potential to compost much faster than a closed system. But a closed system is covered and will retain more moisture which helps increase with the decomposition process. As a rule of thumb, a monitored and maintained compost system, regardless of the type of system, will compost faster than something that isn't maintained well.

Question: My kitchen container uses biodegradable bags. Should I compost the bag with the food?

Answer: You can if they are *backyard compostable*. Industrial or commercially compostable products are not likely to break down in a backyard system. If you notice that the bags aren't breaking down, then you can rip the bags up.

Question: Should we add lime powder?

Answer: No. Compost is usually neutral in pH. Lime increases the pH and is usually only needed for either unusually acidic soil.

Question: Can we add ashes from a charcoal grill?

Answer: No. You can add ashes from a wood fire pit though.

Question: Can you add seaweed?

Answer: Yes. Don't harvest seaweed from the water. Only take it from the beach and don't take a lot of it from one location. This is considered a green.

Question: I have tried to use live oak leaves for the brown without much luck. Can I begin with mulch for the brown?

Answer: Yes. You can use live oak leaves or mulch for your browns. Oak may take a bit longer to break down because of the tannic acid that is naturally occurring. They are good for composting.

Question: What types of mulch? I see a lot of palm tree mulch which I have read does not break down.

Answer: Palm mulch will break down if it is in small enough pieces. Just like your own diet, the more diverse the materials are in your compost, the better quality it will be. A mix of different types of mulches is the best.

Question: If I don't pick out all of the seeds from my scraps, will the seeds sprout when I use the compost on my plants? Like apple seeds, peach pits or watermelon seeds?

Answer: Maybe. The apple and peach are not likely to sprout but tomatoes, peppers, squash and melons may. Papaya seeds often sprout as well. It's not bad – if you don't want them just pull them up and either use as green mulch or toss back into the compost.

Question: Can I use the following in my vegetable raised garden beds?

-Soiled goat bedding

-Soiled goat hay (coastal hay)

Answer: You should compost them first to eliminate the risk of pathogens from fresh manures. You will want to be mindful of the goat farm's deworming schedule and avoid using manure for a while after the de-worming medication has been administered.

Question: I use an old blender and keep it in my kitchen to put my scraps in. The lid keeps the odor down. When full, I add water, blend it and add to my compost bin. Any issues with this process? Will it compost faster?

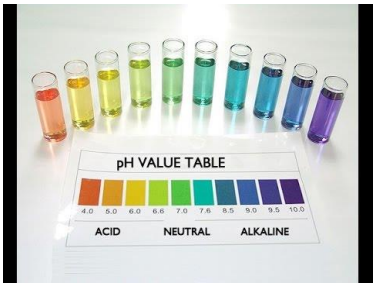
Answer: There are no issues with this process. It will probably not compost faster though. The browns in the compost pile take longer to break down than the greens

Question: Is there a way to add the microorganisms or worms to the bin?

Answer: You can have a separator worm bin for composting worms, or you can add our native worms to your almost finished compost as you find them in your yard. Beneficial micro-organisms will grow naturally without a problem in a properly maintained compost bin. For maximum microbial health, use rain water rather than municipal water to add moisture, locally sources natural and processed browns (mulch and leaves rather than paper or cardboard) and make sure that you are turning your entire compost pile rather than just the top or middle. You can feed your almost finished compost to composting worms if you want to further improve your compost's microbial content.

Question: Can we use citrus fruits in the compost?

Answer: Yes. Avoid using citrus in worm bins though.



Question: How do we know the pH of our compost? Do we need to monitor this?

Answer: Compost is generally pH neutral. If you want to test it, you can have your compost tested with the local extension office or test it at home yourself.

Question: Are chemicals in processing of cardboard a concern?

Answer: Possibly. There is conflicting research that says that the dioxins in cardboard survive the composting process. You will likely have a better finished product by not using cardboard in your compost. However, in urban areas, many people have difficulty obtaining browns. The glue used to hold corrugated cardboard together is the concern. Cardboard made in the USA is typically made with plant based glues; cardboard made elsewhere may contain glue made from other materials.