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Building a Compost Heap

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Adapted from *Four-Season Harvest*, by Eliot Coleman

Simple Solution:

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So often, the obvious solution is right at our fingertips, but it looks so simple that we fail to notice. Generations of gardeners have consistently come up with the same chain of logic: a fertile soil is the key to growing garden vegetables; compost is the key to a fertile soil. The first step in the four-season harvest is learning to make good compost. It's not difficult. Compost wants to happen.

Pick a site near the garden so the finished compost will be close at hand. Whenever possible, place the heap under the branches of a deciduous tree so there will be shade in hot weather and sunlight to thaw the heap in spring. A site near the kitchen makes it convenient to add kitchen scraps. Access to a hose is handy for those times when the heap needs extra moisture. If the site is uphill from the garden, the heavy work of wheelbarrowing loads of compost will have gravity on its side.



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Build the compost heap by alternating layers of brown ingredients (such as dried grass stems, old cornstalks, dried pea and bean vines, reeds, and old hay) with mostly green ones (young, moist, and fresh materials such as kitchen wastes, grass clippings, fresh pea vines). Begin with a layer of straw about 3 inches deep, then add 1 to 6 inches of green ingredients, another 3 inches of straw, and then more green ingredients. The thickness of the green layer depends on the nature of the materials. Loose, open material such as green bean vines or tomato stems can be applied in a thicker (6-inch) layer, while denser material that might mat together, such as kitchen scraps or grass clippings, should be layered thinly (1 to 2 inches). These thicknesses are a place for you to start, but you will learn to modify them as conditions require.

Sprinkle a thin coverage of soil on top of each green layer. Make the soil 1/2 inch deep or so depending on what type of green material is available. If you have just added a layer of weeds with soil on their roots, you can skip the soil

to the compost heap has both a physical and a microbiological effect: physical because certain soil constituents (clay particles and minerals) have been shown to enhance the decomposition of organic matter; microbiological because soil contains millions of microorganisms, which are needed to break down the organic material in the heap. These bacteria, fungi, and other organisms multiply in the warm, moist conditions as decomposition is initiated. If your garden is very sandy or gravelly, you might want to find some clay to add to the heap as the soil layer. As an additional benefit, the clay will improve the balance of soil particle sizes in your garden.

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Four-Season Harvest

Eliot Coleman shows how North American gardeners can successfully use that sun to raise a wide variety of traditional winter vegetables in backyard cold frames and plastic-covered tunnel greenhouses without supplementary heat.

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Description: make a compost heap

Key Terms: compost heap

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