

Cooperative Extension

Tompkins County

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Lasagna Composting

The “Lasagna Method” is a way of structuring a compost system so that maintenance is minimized, pests are deterred, and both large and small amounts of compostables can be handled at any time. This simple layering system can be used in any bin.

Initial Layer:

- The first layer in your bin should be a loose layer of twigs and branches – **stalky material** that will not compress as the compost bin fills up.
- The purpose of this layer is to build in a way for air to reach the center of your pile. Oxygen ensures that the decomposition will not generate unpleasant odors.

“Brown” Layers:

- These can be made of straw, dried leaves, wood chips, sawdust, even torn up paper. All these materials are **carbon-rich**, supplying a critical food source to the decomposer organisms.
- The brown layers help to **balance the moisture** in a pile, since the brown materials are usually much drier than the food scraps in the green layers. These materials are also usually coarser, so they create a **porous structure** that allows air into the center of the pile and allows excess water to escape. Finally, the brown layers serve as a **visual and physical barrier to pests**, by filtering food smells and putting the food scraps out of reach of insect pests.



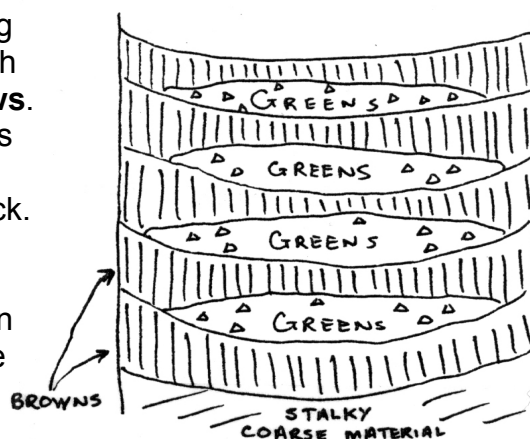
“Green” Layers:

- These are **nitrogen-rich** materials, supplying another critical food source for the decomposers.
- Acceptable “greens” include food scraps from meal preparation, inedible leftovers, grass clippings that are too long to be left on the lawn, garden weeds, manure, etc.
- **DO NOT include** meat, oily materials, dairy products, or bones. These risk attracting pests to the compost area.



Layering Technique:

- Alternate green and brown layers, starting with a brown layer and always ending with a brown layer so that **no food ever shows**.
- Brown layers should be two to three times as thick as green layers. Green layers should be no more than 1 or 2 inches thick.
- Brown layers should be shaped like saucers – lower in the center and higher around the edges – so that the next green layer can be kept to the interior of the pile with **no food showing** on the edges.



Routine Tasks:

- Whenever your indoor collection container is ready to be emptied, take it out to the compost bin, spread the food scraps on top in thin layers – keeping them away from the edges! – and cover them with a generous layer of browns.
- Wash out the kitchen container and return it to its spot, lined with a fresh piece of newspaper to make cleaning easier.

Optional Maintenance:

With this layering technique it is not necessary to turn the compost. However if you wish to get the compost finished sooner, you may choose to turn the bin contents. Compost forks or other digging tools may be used to stir and mix ingredients right in the bin.

Alternatively, if it is possible to simply lift off or undo the existing bin, then you can get easy access to the unfinished compost. Reset the empty bin, put down an initial layer of stalky material, and turn the partially finished compost into the new bin. This will mix the ingredients, and bring the materials that were on the outside edges in to the middle where they will start to break down faster.



Harvesting Finished Compost:

The materials on the bottom layers will tend to finish first, since they started first. If there is unfinished compost on top of the bin, transfer the unfinished compost to a new bin. The finished compost may then be harvested and put to use.

The length of time it takes for compost to be ready depends on many factors, so it is difficult to give a general rule for how long it will take. Weather conditions, the size of your bin, the type of materials included, the amount of turning, and other factors all play a role in determining the speed of breakdown. Generally, a year should be sufficient. But there are ways to test whether or not the compost is “done”, if you are not sure. Check with Cooperative Extension for more information on assessing and using your compost.