

# Black Gold

## Why Compost?

Nothing docx warms a gardener's heart like the sight of compost, the rich, organic material made from recycled vegetable peelings, grass clippings, leaves, twigs, and even coffee grounds. The gardener who has only a few Big Boy tomato plants in between Dark Red Irene geraniums and Bells of Ireland still appreciates a ripe pile of black, nutritious dirt.

Recycling is more popular than ever as conspicuous consumption gives way to a growing ecological awareness. Creating a compost pile, even a simple one, contributes to a healthier ecosystem. The person who recycles cans, glass, and newspapers, and who composts vegetable peelings, leaves, grass clippings, and so on, has taken a small step toward ecological balance. Once you start recycling, you will be reluctant to throw even one apple peeling into the garbage. Besides, most town dumps no longer take any yard waste: grass clippings, leaves and weeds, twigs, and basic yard material.

## What Is a Compost Pile?

Almost anything that grows can be used to make compost, and everything you need to create a compost pile is probably either in your kitchen or around the yard. Though compost looks like simple dirt, it is nutritionally complex.

Think of a compost pile in layers: green, brown, and black materials. The green layer provides all-important nitrogen for the soil, and includes things like grass, vegetable and fruit peelings, and eggshells and coffee grounds (not actually green, but important ingredients). If you live near the ocean, you can add seaweed, but you must rinse it with the hose to remove any salt. You can also add manure from cattle, sheep, horses, or chickens. The brown layer is made up of materials rich in carbon, such as harvested plants, fallen leaves, tree bark, sawdust, wood shavings, pine needles, hedge clippings, straw, and corncobs.<sup>1</sup> Solid materials, such as twigs and stalks; provide texture and aeration. The black layer comes from things that break down easily, such as torn or shredded newspapers and other paper products.

When making compost, your objective is to create a medium in which microbes, fungi, and worms can grow and feed. The gardener's real helpers are microbes. Microbes are efficient little machines that surpass roots in getting nitrogen, phosphorus, and water to plants. Millions of microorganisms attack the compost materials and turn them into crumbly, sweet-smelling dirt, which enhances the production of flower and vegetable gardens. In return, the plants provide the microbes with sugar. These microbes stay close to the roots, protecting their own food supply by warding off root-rot fungi and parasites that can topple the most graceful delphiniums.

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<sup>1</sup> Corncobs decay slowly. If you decide to add them, be sure to chop them into fine pieces.