

Food Scrap Diversion and Management – Tip Sheet #7

Frequently Asked Questions

Overview

Each municipality and household is unique in its food scrap diversion needs based on factors including interest, available space, and staffing levels, and whether schools, restaurants, hospitals, grocery stores, and other institutions have or want food scrap diversion programs. Here are some questions that were asked at UVLSRPC home composting workshops that might help residents and municipal staff understand the range of food scrap diversion and composting strategies.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why should I divert my food scraps?

According to the Northeast Resource Recovery Association, food scraps are heavy, and therefore expensive to dispose of as municipal solid waste (MSW). Nationwide, food scraps comprise 24% by weight of the MSW going into our landfills and incinerators, which makes food scraps the largest single material by weight that we landfill as a country based on the Environmental Protection Agency's most recent data from 2018.



How do I choose a place for my compost pile?

Look for a level area not too close to your house with partial sunshine so the pile has a chance to heat up. Make sure the site is well-drained - this prevents the pile from getting too wet. Areas exposed to wind may make the pile dry out too quickly, necessitating additional watering.

What bin works best for my home/setup?

You can compost with a container of just about any size! If your household produces a lot of food scraps, consider using a two-bin system with one pile being 'active' and the other breaking down over time.



How might you speed up or heat composting?

The faster you can mix your greens and browns together, the faster it will break down. Be sure to cut food scraps into smaller pieces to speed up the process. Any kind of activity you do can to help, like aeration, mixing, or layering, can also speed up the process. Tumblers can be effective and get up to high heats if you are very active with it. Adding finished compost with an established microbial population can also jumpstart the process for a new pile.



What can be composted?

If its organic, meaning plant-based, it should be good to compost! Different materials can take longer (pine needles for example), and scraps like dairy and meat should be composted at higher temperatures, which are not typical in backyard systems. If you make a lasagna and there's a little meat, or if you have noodles that have some oil, that's OK. We're talking about large amounts. Composting by and large is a very forgiving process.

How many browns are needed?

Typically, one part food scraps to three parts browns. You should be able to get enough browns (such as leaves and needles) from your own yard depending on where you live. Wood shavings are relatively affordable and might be in the community at local crafts places or home improvement shops. Make sure browns such as woods or grasses aren't treated.

What's the deal with compostable products?

Compostable, biodegradable, bioplastics - these terms can be confusing. Some bags will look like they're compostable, even mimicking the appearance of truly compostable bags, and say "biodegradable" or have euphemisms, but they will not break down in your system. Many compostable bags on the market will break down in an industrial, commercial setting where they reach appropriate heats. However, for backyard systems, BioBags are more easily compostable. The Center for Environmental Health has a database of compostable products, paper plates and bowls.

What about contaminants?

If you're a tea drinker, many tea bags now are made with plastic in it. Those plastics won't break down. Make sure you peel PLU stickers off. Check the source of your brown materials for chemically treated materials, add only truly compostable products for YOUR system (consider your activity level and compost temperature or simply avoid materials that take longer to break down/manage).

Will bears and other animals be attracted to my compost pile?

It depends! If you use the proper ratio of 1:3 of 'greens' (food scraps) to 'browns' (dried leaves, straw, shredded newspaper), this should reduce the smell. Avoid putting meat, fish, and dairy products into your compost bin, which can attract animals if not managed regularly, and try burying the food scraps deeply within the pile. Fruit flies can be attracted if you eat a lot of melons or citrus. The flies will die down. If they do not, make sure you're getting enough browns and rinse down your collection bucket with a vinegar-water mix.



Can you compost throughout the year?

Yes! Compost piles can be maintained during the winter months. The piles will often stay hot enough to continue to break down material. If your household uses less produce in the winter, just let the pile freeze and restart it in the spring.

I never have 'finished' compost. When do I stop adding to my pile?

It's important to 'finish' a compost pile when it looks full and start a new one so that you can get finished, usable compost. More than one bin or pile helps with this material flow.

