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Composting FOR **DUMMIES®**

**by Cathy Cromell and the Editors of The
National Gardening Association**



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About the Author

Cathy Cromell is the Southwest regional reporter for the National Gardening Association (NGA). She completed the Master Composter and Master Gardener certification programs at the University of Arizona Maricopa County Cooperative Extension Urban Horticulture Department in Phoenix, where she also absorbed abundant hands-on experience hoisting tons of organic matter while overseeing the composting area of the Master Gardener Demonstration Garden.

As editor of Arizona Master Gardener Press at the Cooperative Extension, Cathy produced gardening books that received numerous awards. She was also a writer for *Better Homes and Gardens New Garden Book* and a contributing writer for *Gardening in the Southwest* (Sunset Books).

As garden editor-at-large for *Phoenix Home & Garden* magazine, Cathy enjoys helping readers — especially newcomers to the desert — uncover the mysteries of arid land growing conditions in her monthly article, *Desert Gardening 101*. She also scouts earth-friendly landscapes around the Southwest to feature in the magazine's *Garden Talks* profile. "I've never encountered a gardener who wasn't delighted to share their plant passions and gardening knowledge. Their generosity and enthusiasm inspire me to tell their stories."

The National Gardening Association (NGA) is committed to sustaining and renewing the fundamental links between people, plants, and the earth. Founded in 1972 as "Gardens for All" to spearhead the community garden movement, today's NGA promotes environmental responsibility, advances multidisciplinary learning and scientific literacy, and creates partnerships that restore and enhance communities.

NGA is best known for its garden-based curricula, educational materials, international initiatives, and several youth garden grant programs. Together, these reach more than 300,000 children nationwide each year. NGA's Web sites, one for home gardeners and another for those who garden with kids, build community and offer a wealth of custom content.

To find out more about the National Gardening Association, write to 1100 Dorset St., South Burlington, VT 05403, or visit its Web sites at www.garden.org or www.kidsgardening.org.

Dedication

To my parents, Patricia and William Cromell. Thank you for instilling me with a love of plants and nature that has sustained and nourished me throughout my life.

Author's Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Suzanne DeJohn and the National Gardening Association for this opportunity to write about one of my favorite gardening topics — the inestimable benefits of rotting organic matter.

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I'm fortunate to know dozens of talented gardeners and horticulture professionals who generously share their knowledge and expertise with me. I offer special thanks to Carolyn Chard, Frank Martin, and Annette Weaver, who many years ago infected me with a virulent dose of their enthusiasm for composting; to Jo Cook, Mike Hills, and Kirti Mathura, who respond to my midnight e-mails with good humor and precise detail; and to Robyn Baker, Louisa Ballard, and Kathy Green, who remind me of all the truly important things in a plant addict's life.

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Introduction

Environmental issues and green living have experienced an upswing in popular interest in recent years, and composting is right in the thick of it. Recycling organic wastes where they're generated, rather than transporting them to a landfill, is an integral part of today's earth-friendly lifestyle. Compost, the premium-quality end product of this process, offers a terrific bonus for your garden and landscape.

As a child growing up in Minnesota, I recall using a hand trowel to easily scoop out a transplant hole in our vegetable garden's loamy soil, but the growing season was all too brief. In Arizona, my hole-digging may start with a pickaxe, but I'm spoiled by year-round gardening. Although growing conditions differ radically from region to region or country to country, the basics of enriching garden beds with compost to produce healthy vegetables and flowers apply wherever you live. I hope this book helps you become a composting convert and more successful gardener.

About This Book

This book is for people who, like Rumpelstiltskin of fairy tale fame, want to turn straw into gold. Well, black gold anyway, which is what savvy gardeners call their compost. This book gives you the keys to transform what some see as useless organic refuse — yard trimmings, grass clippings, kitchen scraps, and of course, straw — into a valuable stash of black, crumbly compost for improving your soil and nourishing your plants.

If you picked up this book out of curiosity and composting is new to you, don't feel intimidated. There's nothing difficult or mysterious about it: Everything organic decomposes eventually. This book guides you every step of the way to help your composting process be productive and trouble-free.

Conventions Used in This Book

You can compost organic matter in all sorts of receptacles. I use the terms *bin*, *container*, and *unit* interchangeably to signify something that corrals your compost materials more neatly than a free-standing heap.

When I mention *county cooperative extension office*, I'm referring to university-sponsored outreach programs in the United States that are free to the public in all 50 states. Many offices also train Master Gardener volunteers to answer questions about composting as well as other horticultural topics. Canadian Master Gardener volunteers are affiliated with varied organizations, including universities and public gardens. Use your favorite Internet search engine to locate these programs in your region.

You'll find the following other conventions used throughout this book to call attention to specific information:

- ✔ New terms being defined are highlighted in *italics*.
- ✔ **Boldfaced** text indicates the action part of numbered steps or key text in bulleted lists.
- ✔ `Monofont` is used for Web addresses.

What You're Not to Read

Feel free to skip anything marked with a Technical Stuff icon or appearing in a shaded sidebar. I think this information is interesting, but you don't have to know it to be a successful composter.

Foolish Assumptions

I think it's a tad rude to make assumptions about you when we've never met, but my publisher insists! So, here's what I assumed about you in writing this book:

- ✔ You want to save money by producing your own nutrient-rich compost to use as a soil amendment or to enhance soil fertility.
- ✔ You want to generate lots of lovely compost to grow the best flower, vegetable, or herb beds in the neighborhood.
- ✔ You're concerned about the environment and want to do your part to reduce the amount of organic waste sent to landfills.
- ✔ You follow the philosophy of "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" in other areas of your life and want to add composting to the list.
- ✔ You want a family-friendly activity that helps your children (or grandchildren) understand nature's own recycling process.
- ✔ You don't live where local government offers collection of kitchen scraps or food waste for community composting.
- ✔ You want to get more exercise and fresh air, while still doing something productive!

How This Book Is Organized

This book is separated into five major parts, each one covering a general topic related to composting. Take a look at the part summaries that follow, and head to whatever part sounds like it best addresses your composting needs.

Part I: Composting Basics

If you're curious as to why composting matters, this part starts with an explanation of the problems caused by sending yard trimmings and kitchen waste to landfills. It describes how you can help alleviate those problems by composting organic waste at home. In this part I also cover the basic tools needed to compost. Rotting organic matter provides a livelihood for billions of decomposer organisms, and they receive their 15 minutes of fame in this part as well.

Part II: Selecting a Home and Method for Your Compost

Here's where you get help to decide where to compost: above-ground, in a hole, or within the confines of a container. Or perhaps you'll take up kitchen composting, which also uses containers. In addition to a rundown of your manufactured container options, this part also includes a chapter on the variety of containers you can construct yourself.

Part III: Compost Happens

Flip to this section to find out what ingredients can go into your compost pile, what stays out, and how to mix it all up in the right proportions based upon your schedule. You also get recommendations on what to do with all that compost you're churning out.

Part IV: Expanding Your Compost Horizons

These chapters describe other methods to process kitchen waste or add organic matter to the soil. I explain vermicomposting — working with composting worms that eat your garbage. If you want to add more organic matter to your soil than your traditional compost pile can generate, take a look at the chapters in this part explaining cover crops or green manures, and sheet composting or composting mulch.

Part V: The Part of Tens

Head straight to the troubleshooting tips if your compost pile isn't cooperating with you. You'll also find the answers to ten quick FAQs for an overview of composting basics.

Icons Used in This Book

This book contains icons that flag noteworthy bits of information. This is the type of information you can expect from these icons:



This is where I include easy-to-follow suggestions to save you time, effort, or money. They include a few gems from my own experience that I wish someone had shared with me years ago!



This is the need-to-know, key information to retain about composting.



This icon serves as an alert to avoid potentially unpleasant or unsafe activities. It also steers you clear of practices that impede your efforts to produce compost in a timely fashion.



Sometimes it's helpful or fun to understand a little more than "how-to" information and delve into the "whys" behind a particular process. This icon highlights information that you don't need to know but may find useful.

Where to Go from Here

I hope you're excited to dive into composting. And I hope you aren't afraid of doing something wrong. Decomposition of organic matter is a natural process that's going to happen regardless of what you do. But you can help it along, so this book guides you along the most direct path to problem-free composting. It's designed so that you can absorb info from any chapter that catches your eye.

If you want to understand how decomposition really happens and are interested in microscopic organisms, head straight to Chapter 3. If you want to start composting with the least amount of effort, check out Chapter 4, which describes a freestanding heap. If you're curious about containers, jump to Chapters 5 and 6. If you're looking for a fun activity with kids (that might teach them a little something when they aren't suspecting it), check out Chapter 10 on composting with worms. Otherwise, thumb through the book until something catches your fancy.

Part I

Composting Basics

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant

