



## Henderson County Master Gardeners Weekly News Article      January 01, 2018

### Try Composting This Year by Lydia Holley

Mention composting and you will most likely get one of two reactions: either “Ew, that’s gross!” or “Wow, that’s neat!”. Most gardeners have the second reaction. Composting, to them, is a magical process which turns kitchen scraps into garden gold.



In reality, composting is basically just decomposition accelerated. You may want to think of it as a science project for adults. It also has a lingo of its own: browns and greens. If you know the lingo and the formula, you will know how to compost.

What is considered a ‘brown’ or a ‘green’ is determined by its ratio of carbon to nitrogen (C:N). Browns are high in carbon and are things such as leaves, sawdust, hay, and paper. Greens are high in nitrogen and are things such as fruit and vegetable kitchen scraps, grass clippings, coffee grounds, and tea bags.

Weeds pulled from the garden are another green which can be added. However, you will need to remember to pull your weeds before they go to seed, or cut the seed heads off before putting them in the compost bins (unless you want that weed all over your garden). To keep your compost bins from smelling, do not add any meats, bread, yeast, grease, or dairy. Also, do not add manure from any animal that eats meat due to the possibility of harmful pathogens.

Now comes the formula. You will want to add more browns than greens in a ratio of 3 to 1. Whenever you add a pail of food scraps to your compost bins, add three pails of leaves or shredded paper at the same time. Simplicity. And the beauty is, especially for those that hate math, you do not have to be very accurate. Adding browns to greens in a ratio of 2 to 1 or even 5 to 1 should be fine, although much depends upon the water weight of your greens, and the C:N ratio of your material.

If your compost stinks, just add more browns. If your compost is not decomposing, add more greens. Layering the browns and greens each time you add material to your pile will aid in its decomposition. So will shredding all the leaves and paper you put into your compost piles.

You may add an accelerant such as bone meal, blood meal, alfalfa, or molasses, but these are not usually necessary. What is necessary is moisture. You will want to add enough water for your pile to remain moist, but not too wet. If your pile is too wet, you can add more browns.

Decomposition also takes air, which is added whenever you turn the compost. Turning weekly is usually recommended. Again, do not be stressed. Turning less often will just slow the decomposition time.

After you begin composting, you may become aware of all the items in your garbage which could be added to the compost pile: almost all mail (no plastic windows, no glossy magazines), 100% cotton shirts or jeans, paper bags, hair and fingernail clippings, manures from horses, cows, chickens, or rabbits, and so much more. Eggshells can be added but are best broken down into a powder first. If you become very interested, you can dig deeper into C:N ratios, determine how various tree leaves act in the process, discuss hot vs. cold composting, compare bin types, etc.

Composting may not be magic, but the end results may have a magical effect on your plants. If you are not already composting, give it a try this year.

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