



Composting to Reduce Landfill Waste

One person's trash is another person's treasure. Such is the case with compost, which is made from decaying food and other organic material that is often discarded as trash. Compost is referred to as “black gold” because its nutrient richness makes it highly valuable when added to the soil for landscaping, home garden use, and even farming. Did you know that on average more than fifty percent of curbside trash is made up of compostable materials? According to the Institute for Local Self Reliance, thirty-seven percent of average residential trash is made up of food scraps, yard trimmings, and wood waste - which can all be composted. The other fifteen percent is paper and paperboard, which can be recycled traditionally or composted. In addition to taking up space, when trapped in a landfill, food scraps and other organic waste generates harmful methane gas.

So, what does compost have to do with recycling? Composting is the natural recycling of food, yard, and other organic waste to create fertilizer. Compost can completely replace store-bought fertilizers that may contain harmful chemicals and be used to improve soil structure and water retention, increase long-term soil fertility, and support plant growth and health. You can compost at home or send materials to a commercial facility. Barry County only has a few options for commercial composting and they only accept yard waste, so we will focus on at-home composting for this article.

There are many different ways to compost at home, from a simple backyard compost pile to a store-bought compost tumbler. You can even compost indoors using worms! Consider how much space you have and how much compostable material your household generates when choosing what type of bin or pile you'll have. Once you've determined the type and location for your compost you can get started by collecting materials. Include things like fruit and vegetable scraps (don't forget to remove the stickers), eggshells, coffee grounds, tea bags and leaves, herbaceous animal manure, paper towels and napkins, cardboard contaminated with food, leaves, lawn clippings, twigs, sawdust and woodchips, straw and hay, and even hair and fur! Avoid adding animal products such as meat or dairy as well as cooking oils and greasy foods to your compost. Also, be careful not to add any invasive or diseased plants.

It's best to balance the amounts of “green” and “brown” materials to ensure a healthy, productive compost pile. “Green materials” are food waste, which are generally wet and are high in nitrogen and “brown materials” include paper, cardboard, and yard waste, which are usually dry and high in carbon. Layer “brown” and “green” materials, add water during dry periods to retain moisture, and turn the pile regularly to ensure it has enough oxygen. Turn compost with a compost tumbler or manually using a pitchfork or shovel. Once the compost is a rich, dark color, it is ready to use!