

# Diggin' in the Dirt: Composting Basics

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## Hazardous waste collection event in Clatskanie

Columbia County is providing residents a safe and responsible way to discard Unwanted Paint and Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) that can't be placed in garbage bins. On Saturday, October 7 the county is sponsoring a free household hazardous waste and paint collection event in Clatskanie from 8 am to noon. County residents are invited to bring items to the Clatskanie City Park.

The program accepts nearly all household items that contain one or more of the following key words: Warning - Caution - Poison - Dangerous - Toxic - Flammable - Combustible - Ignitable - Corrosive - Oxidizer.

This event will accept paints (oil and latex), stains, and primers.

HHW products are accepted for free during collection. The HHW Program **cannot** accept:

- Unwanted/unused medicines, pharmaceuticals, or other medical waste including sharps unless in approved container
- General Garbage or Trash
- Asbestos

### For more information, see

<http://www.co.columbia.or.us/files/lds/solid-waste/Columbia-County-HOUSEHOLD-HAZARDOUS-WASTE-2017-schedule.pdf>

Keep products in original containers. Do not mix products together; dangerous reactions can occur when some materials are mixed. Make sure products are properly sealed to prevent leaks and spills. If a container is leaking, secure it in a secondary leak-proof container (not a plastic bag). Pack containers in sturdy boxes and secure your HHW items in the rear of your vehicle (truck bed, hatchback, trunk, etc.) as it eases the removal of the HHW from your vehicle, away from the driver, passengers, pets, heat, sparks or flames. Do not put items in plastic bags.

## Composting your way to a happy garden and landscape

Making compost is not a mysterious process and it is a really good thing for your garden or landscape. You collect your vegetable and fruit kitchen scraps together with some landscape trimmings and create an environment for them to decompose (rot) into wonderful crumbly



finished compost. Your plants will love the stuff, either worked into the soil or used as a surface mulch. And plant recycling is a nice thing to do. But there are a few tricks and some different ways to get to the same end result.

The basic concept of composting is that all plant materials will eventually rot. But what you want to do is speed the process up. Billions of fungi, bacteria, worms, and tiny insects do the heavy lifting of composting. If you make them happy, they will work swiftly to deliver very nice compost. Their requirements are simple: a mix of nitrogen rich plant scraps and other more fibrous plant debris, enough moisture but not too much, and oxygen.

Gardeners speak of "green" and "brown" plant materials to be mixed together. The green materials are your fresh vegetable and fruit scraps, lawn clippings (if you haven't used lawn herbicides), and livestock (not hog) manures. They provide readily available sources of nitrogen to build up the populations of decomposing microorganisms. Bacteria and fungi aggressively feed on the other more fibrous "brown" plant materials (like shrub trimmings). That releases nutrients in the brown mate-

rials and the pace of composting becomes self-sustaining. Generally, you would mix 2 parts (by volume) of brown (leaves, stemmy plant materials, wood chips, shredded newspapers, etc.) with 1 part of green material. This is not an exact recipe but it is better to err on the side of more "brown" materials than "green" materials. And don't forget to add egg shells for their calcium.

Moisture and oxygen go together. In your compost pile or bin or in a worm box, the environment needs to be moist but not sopping wet. If it is too wet, the pore spaces around the plant debris fill with water and there is no (or low) oxygen. This is how you get stinky compost! A certain set of bacteria that live in low oxygen environments dominate the pile and produce sulfur gas ("sewer smell") that is not pleasant. The right mix of materials will help with aeration and pile drainage.

There are lots of ways to compost. You can dig holes in the garden and put the vegetable and fruit trimmings directly in the soil. The material will compost slowly in the winter but speed up as the soil warms and dries out. This can draw raccoons and skunks that are interested in what you have for them. Slicing soil into the trimmings before you cover it will dampen their interest. There is no need to add brown materials with this system.

Bins allow you to readily mix the brown and green materials to produce fine, rich compost. Bins can be purchased or made. We have plans at the Extension office or they are available on-line. I have seen some nice bins made out of pallets. Bins should be covered in the winter to allow you to control the moisture level of the pile. This will keep the compost process moving. You can also just make a pile of mixed materials and cover it (assuming it is somewhat moist) with clear or black plastic and then let it go. Any of these systems do best with an occasional mixing of the pile.

Finally, you can make a worm bin. These are best where you have problems with rats getting into a compost bin. Fill the worm bin with moistened shredded newspaper, and add your fruit and vegetable trimmings. We also have information on worm bins. You can buy worms from bait shops or on-line from

various dealers in the Portland area. Red wigglers are the preferred species. Night crawlers don't like worm bins.

One final note: You will speed the composting of your brown materials if you run them through a chipper-shredder or even a lawn mower for leaves. By chopping the "brown" portion of the mix, you create a larger surface area for the bacteria and fungi to work on.

For more complete information, see the Metro website at <http://www.oregonmetro.gov/tools-living/yard-and-garden/composting>

## Many Extension publications available online

**Are you putting up salsa, saving seeds, or thinking about planting grapes?** OSU has a large number of its publications available for free download. Just go to <https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/>. Click on publications and start exploring.

**Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.**

**The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.**

## Free newsletter

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called County Living) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed to you. Call 503 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can sign up for email notification of when to find the latest edition on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/>.

## Contact information for the Extension office

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