

## How to Compost Outdoors – the easy way

*By Crystal Stinson*

Spending a couple hours visiting and talking about compost piles with Craik resident Naomi Hunter opened my mind to the possibilities of what proper composting can be like. I learned that anyone can do this!

For those of you who live in town and are thinking about setting up a composter but were afraid of what the neighbours might think and say, the method of composting described here will not be stinky, nor attract rodents and/or stray dogs if it is done properly. It will look good and also provide you with amazing compost that you can use in your garden or give away to your friendly neighbours.

The first step is to build a bin. The bin can be made out of chicken wire or pallets, or from scrap lumber. Do not use treated lumber as the chemicals will leach into the compost. The bin should have an open bottom, and the top can have a lid or not. The best systems have more than one bin, side by side, but if you are just starting, start with one bin and you can always add more later.

After your attractive looking bin is built, lay a thick layer (45 cm or 18 inches) of mulch down. This mulch can be leaves, dried grass or straw. This layer will help air circulate below the pile. Next, take your bucket of scraps that you have been collecting in the kitchen over the last few days, and dump it into the centre of the pile. Cover it with mulch completely. The proper ratio of carbon (browns - mulch) to nitrogen (greens – kitchen scraps) is important. One bucket of scraps to an armful of mulch is about right. Each time you add scraps, you'll also need to add mulch. It will seem like you are adding too much mulch, but once the composting starts, the pile will continually shrink and will never get too large.

If you have access to a little fresh manure, this is a good thing to add to a new compost pile (or to an established one in the spring) as it adds beneficial micro-organisms. This can also act as a deterrent for pests. Adding a bucket of dirt and a few worms to a new pile is also a good idea, but make sure to add worms to the bottom of the pile, as the middle and top can get too hot for worms. Dirt can also be added if the pile does get a little smelly.

The next time that you add scraps, you need to pull the layer of straw back until you see your previous scraps, then dump your bucket and cover it with new mulch. This is an important step – don't just throw the new scraps on top before pulling the old mulch back!

With this method of composting, turning the pile is not necessary – let the pile work on its own!

You can continue to compost throughout the winter, just add your scraps, and continue to layer with mulch and you will be surprised that it will continue to shrink down.

The pile will get hot – it can get to temperatures of 65 degrees C. When your pile is this warm, adding things like oil, dairy, meat is okay. These are things that normally people are warned against adding to a compost pile. With a pile this hot, you can even compost old jeans, napkins, paper plates, hair.....anything natural.

With our drier climate in Saskatchewan, it is important to keep your compost at a proper moisture level. It should be the consistency of a wet sponge – you will need to add water (a garden hose works great) particularly in the dry months. Once in a while we do get a heavy rain, and you will want to cover your compost heap at this time (tarps work great). Naomi's idea of a "dream composter" would include a lean-to lid over the composter with eaves that drain into rain collection bins.

### *Things not to add*

You can compost pretty much anything that is organic in nature, but there are a few things that should not go in the pile. Dog and cat feces should have their own pile and should not be used on your garden. Also, if grass or leaves have been sprayed with chemical, you shouldn't use that compost in the garden either.

Wood ash is another things that should not be added to a compost pile, but can and should be added directly to the garden. Fresh grass clippings are considered a “green” with lots of nitrogen, and you should let them sit before adding to a compost pile. Grass can also be added directly to your garden or around the base of trees and shrubs.

*When is my compost ready?*

At some point (after a season or two), you’ll stop adding compost to your pile and let it sit. This is where a multi-bin system is useful – let one bin sit while you start the next. Let it sit for 1 to 2 years before harvesting. It should look like rich soil when it is done. You can harvest sooner (6 months) but it may be too rich for the garden.

Thank you to Naomi who took the time to tell me all about her outdoor composting method.