

Composting: Frequently Asked Questions

Q1. I have fruit flies in my kitchen catcher. If I put this in my composter will I have a fruit fly issue? Or should I just throw out the kitchen catcher items in the garbage?

A. Fruit flies are not unusual. Fruit flies in the kitchen catcher will move to the composter, but the best way to make it inhospitable for them is to keep the composter as damp as a wrung out sponge and to cover your greens with browns. There is no problem with fruit flies being in the composter or the kitchen catcher, other than being unpleasant for people.

If you have fruit flies in the house you should:

1. Empty the kitchen catcher into the composter immediately. Cover the fresh greens with some browns or bury them in the pile so you don't get a swarm of flies in the face next time you open the composter.
2. Wash the kitchen catcher using hot water with soap or vinegar, or put it in the dishwasher on a no-heat setting.
3. Cover a dish of apple cider vinegar with plastic wrap, then poke 6 holes with a toothpick through the wrap. Flies get in but can't get out. There are many variations on this and other methods. Check out <http://www.wikihow.com/Get-Rid-of-Fruit-Flies>.
4. Options:
 - a. Wash fruit (including stuff you wouldn't normally wash, like bananas and oranges) with water and a little soap or white vinegar to rid them of eggs.
 - b. If you have room, put the fruit remnants or even your whole kitchen catcher in the fridge or freezer. Eggs don't like the cold.
 - c. Keep the kitchen catcher outside during summer fruit fly season.

Q2. Wondering if having LOTS of fruit flies in the composter is typical or if that is a sign I need to water more or doing something not quite right. Everything seems to be breaking down fine, I just have hundreds of fruit flies buzzing around every time I lift the lid to the compost.

A. Fruit flies are fine in the composter but can be unpleasant if a big swarm of them fly up at you every time you take the lid off. To minimize this make sure you are watering enough to keep it as damp as a wrung out sponge, and put a layer of browns over top of any greens you put in. That will provide a barrier between you and the fresh greens, and those things that like to eat them. If you do not have any browns handy for covering the fresh food scraps, bury them in the pile.

Q3. The composting has been going great, other than I've just discovered it has been 100% taken over by ants. I could sure some advice on how to proceed.

A. Are the ants just in the composter or do you have ants throughout your yard? If you have already had an existing ant issue, the composter is going to fall victim to that as well.

But if the ants are just in the composter, the first line of defense is moisture. Make sure your composter is damp as a wrung out sponge throughout on an ongoing basis. Start by flooding them out: add a lot of water (not so much that the compost turns soupy, but enough that everything in there is wet), then aerate. In a couple days (3-4) repeat that process. That should get rid of them, and then you can keep it damp as a wrung out sponge.

You may need to increase your stirring and watering to twice a week. They won't want to be there if it is consistently damp. It doesn't matter for the compost that they are there; you just don't want it to turn into a giant ant farm. So keep actively managing it and it shouldn't get out of hand.

If you want to kill them, put some cornmeal or icing sugar in an old plastic container (like a yogurt container) with some holes punched along the bottom edge. Place the container next to the composter.

Q4. The stuff in kitchen catcher is covered in mold. Is it OK to go in the composter?

A. Yes, this isn't a problem at all. The decomposition is beginning!

Q5. Compost recipe: twigs at bottom - does this layer need to be replaced every year? Do the twigs break down as well?

A. Twigs should go at the bottom whenever you have an empty composter. Since you have only one composter you will likely just harvest from time to time from the bottom rather than stopping adding and harvesting the whole thing. If that is the case, you won't need to add twigs again. If you empty the whole thing you will need to start the process again and add twigs. Yes, the twigs will break down, but that's just fine. They're just there to help make sure you have some air in there while you start adding. If you don't have twigs, don't worry about it. They aren't a critical component if composting.

Q6. What can I use for browns aside from fallen leaves?

A. Newspaper is probably the most abundant brown. What are you planning to do with the compost? If you are planning to use it in the veggie garden you might consider buying end of the roll newsprint from the Advocate for \$5/roll so you don't have the petroleum based ink in your compost.

Q7. Do you need to wait until the compost is at a certain temperature (over 40 degrees for 5 days) prior to mixing/turning?

A. Turning your compost is not related to temperature. Once you have added greens and browns start turning once a week.

Q8. It's been almost a week and I am about to add some more kitchen greens - am I supposed to stir the twig base up into the rest of the stuff that's been brewing away in there? Or do I just lightly stir? I'm confused on that!

A. Don't worry about stirring up the twigs. That will happen and that's ok; they will help create air pockets wherever they are in the pile.

Q9. Can coloured newspaper go in?

A. Yes, coloured newsprint and flyers can go in the composter but it must be plain, unglassy newsprint. No magazines or coated paper of any kind.

Q10. I have lost a lot of leaves and flower petals off a couple of my trees in the recent wind and rain. I was planning to rake them up and add them to the compost, but are green leaves considered green or brown?

A. The petals and green leaves will be considered a green.

Q11. I was wondering if you can put citrus in your compost? I can't remember it being mentioned and there is conflicting information on the internet. I use a lot of lemons.

A. Yes, you can put citrus in the composter but it's a bit "woodier" so can take longer to break down. For things that take longer to break down it's best to make the pieces as small as possible.

I would make sure the rinds are cut at least in quarters. You may need to sift them out of your compost when you harvest it and give them a little more time in the bin.

You want to make sure that no one thing makes up the majority of your inputs into the compost. The best compost is made with a variety of substances. When you say you use a lot of lemons, do they make up 50% of your greens? This is probably too much; too acidic. I would suggest they make up no more than 15% of your input.

Q12. Are you able to put in poplar tree pods (the stickies) into the compost bin?

A. Yes, you can put the poplar pods into your compost bin. However, they are seeds so you need to watch for "volunteer" sprouting of the poplars in your composter and/or where you use the compost. Also, you may want to limit the amount you put in because they may take awhile to break down. They would be considered a brown.

Q13. I forgot to ask you about paper towel and toilet paper tubes going into compost as a brown, is it ok?

A. Yes, you can use paper towel and toilet paper tubes as a brown. I don't know what they are glued together with so you need to decide how risky that is for you, taking into consideration what you are using the compost for.

Q14. Are eggshells a brown or green?

A. Eggshells are neither a brown nor a green, exactly, but are super good for your compost. Crush them up and put them in your greens, so you are sure to add browns to them.

Q15. Can you compost larch?

A. No, they fall in the evergreen category.

Q16. Do you only put on a shovel full of dirt once? The brochure from Alberta Environment says to put a shovel full of dirt on every layer.

A. A shovel full of dirt won't hurt your compost, and will cover up the ripe greens nicely. But it will take up more room in your composter that you could be using for compostables. Instead we suggest putting a layer of browns on top of your greens or burying fresh greens in the pile to protect against smell and pests.

Q17. This one is from my husband... I think he was trying to be funny. Is facial tissue (kleenex) compostable? I told him no, because there shouldn't be bodily fluids (I remember the "no boogers" part of the presentation!) but he told me I should check in with an expert.

A. You are exactly right: no bodily fluids because we don't want to be spreading any pathogens since our composters can't be guaranteed to get hot enough to kill them. In 2018 we will have curbside organics collection and you can put the booger filled Kleenex in there along with meat, dairy, pizza boxes, and all manner of things that you don't put in your back yard composter (while still putting the good stuff in your composter of course!).

Q18. If I compost through the winter (I am not even 1/4 full in my composter, is this good/bad/weird? There are two of us in this house), do I still follow the 1 green - 2 brown rule? Or can I just pile up the greens and hope for a quick thaw?

A. Don't forget that in the summer, things decompose quite quickly (especially if you are turning and watering) so it shrinks lots. Your 1/4 full composter could easily mean that you've put 1/2 a

composter of waste in there. So the amount is totally normal. You should definitely try to follow the 2:1 brown/green rule in the winter because things don't shrink and break down in the winter so it will start to fill up and you don't want a bin full of greens in the spring because they can get stinky.

Q19. I have a question about foreign weeds in the lawn clippings. Are daisy and clover tops bad for the compost or will they reproduce later in the finished product? I have not been using lawn clippings that contain these in my composter, can they be placed in the composter?

A. I would be cautious about how you are using lawn clippings for several reasons:

1. Grass clippings take up a lot of space. Unless you are short on greens, I would leave them out.
2. Grass clippings can contain weeds. You can reduce the risk of them spreading by thoroughly drying the clippings before putting them in the composter, but this adds an extra step or two to your lawn maintenance.
3. Grass gets stinky and compacted. You need to make sure that you are layering it well with browns in 10 cm layers.

Since grass clippings can be composted by The City in the Yard Waste program, I would put them there unless you need them for greens. If you do need them, I would "dead head" the flowers where the seeds are before mowing, and make sure you dry the clippings before putting in the composter.

Q20. My composter is bulging at the bottom, and my door is not opening/closing properly.

A. This will need to be dealt with. It's usually one of a couple issues:

1. It's too wet. If the compost is too wet it will be too heavy and put pressure on the composter. Compost should be as damp as a wrung out sponge, not muddy. Mix well and add browns.
2. The composter wasn't put together properly
3. The composter isn't on level ground
4. The composter is too full and the compost should be harvested.

Q21. Can larger fruit seeds go in i.e. peach seeds, cherry pits, avocado pits, etc.?

A. Large fruit seeds like cherry and peach pits can go in the composter, but will take a very long time to break down. I would put them in the garbage.