What to Place in Your Backyard Bin or Pile

On November 15, 2012, nationally observed as America Recycles Day, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced that food is now the single largest type of waste going to America’s municipal landfills and incinerators. More than 33 million tons of food is wasted each year. When food is discarded in landfills, it produces methane, a potent greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change. Americans throw away up to 40 percent of their food, an average of 20 pounds per person a month. Much of this wasted food is actually surplus, wholesome and edible food that could have helped those in need. Food waste makes up about 12% of what is thrown away.

Composting is nature’s way of recycling. Composting converts organic materials, including food scraps (like fruits and vegetables) and yard waste trimmings (like leaves, grass and small tree branches) into a dark, earthy-smelling soil conditioner, thereby preserving valuable nutrient-rich organic resources. Additionally, composting can save money by lowering disposal costs and replacing store-bought fertilizers. Compost also saves water by helping the soil hold moisture, reducing water runoff. Composting can make a significant contribution to achieving waste reduction goals, especially if organic waste comprises a large proportion of your waste stream.

If you are interested in developing an onsite composting bin, first check with your local community or county waste and recycling coordinator to identify any restrictions on outdoor composting. A properly constructed compost pile is needed to minimize nuisances (such as odors) and achieve a quality finished compost.

Composting is easy with some basic guidelines. To learn more about backyard composting and tips for success, watch SWANCC’s video at swancc.org.

Acceptable Materials

Greens: Nitrogen-Rich Materials
- Grass Clippings
- Fruits and Vegetables
- Bread and Grains
- Coffee Grounds and Filters
- Paper Tea Bags (no staple) or Loose Leaves
- Chicken, Rabbit, Cow or Horse Manure
- Hair and Fur

Browns: Carbon-Rich Materials
- Leaves, Twigs and Small branches
- Shredded Paper and Cardboard Rolls
- Sawdust
- Hay and Straw
- Wood Chips
- Egg Shells
- Dried-out Flowers or Plants
- Nut Shells
- Ashes (wood burning fireplace)
- Dryer and Vacuum Cleaner Lint
- Wool or Cotton Textiles

Unacceptable Materials

Do Not Add: Oils, Fats, Meats, Bones or Non-Biodegradable Materials
- Meat, Poultry or Fish Products and Bones
- Dairy Products
- Fats, Grease or Oils
- Pet Waste
- Soiled Diapers
- Plastic, Metal or Glass
- Charcoal Ash
- Large Wood Material
- Fire-starter Logs
- Treated or Painted Wood
- Waxed or Glossy Paper
- Synthetic Fibers
- Weeds, Diseased or Invasive Plants
- Black Walnut Tree Leaves or Twigs
- Yard Trimings Treated with Chemical Pesticides
- Anything Not Biodegradable

Guidelines sourced from epa.gov/compost

Visit swancc.org for additional information.
Composting Resources

University of Illinois Extension
University of Illinois Extension is the outreach effort of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, offering educational programs to residents of all of Illinois’ 102 counties – and far beyond. Through learning partnerships that put knowledge to work, U of I Extension’s programs are aimed at making life better, healthier, safer and more profitable for individuals and their communities.

web.extension.illinois.edu/state/hort.html

Cornell Cooperative Extension
The Cornell Cooperative Extension puts research into practice by providing high value educational programs and university-backed resources that help solve real-life problems, transforming and improving New York families, farms, businesses and communities.

cce.cornell.edu

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
epa.gov/epawaste/conserve/rrr/composting/index.htm

Compost Guide
compostguide.com

Earth911
earth911.com

Home Composting Made Easy
Step by step instructions, products and resources for backyard composting
homecompostingmadeeasy.com

How to Compost
howtocompost.org

Let It Rot: The Gardener’s Guide to Composting by Stu Campbell
storey.com

Master Composter
mastercomposter.com

MasterGardening
mastergardening.com

Worms Eat My Garbage by Mary Applehoff
Flowerfield Enterprises, LLC
(269) 327-0108
wormwoman.com

Workshops and Classes

Angellic Organics Learning Center
Caledonia and Chicago
(815) 389-8455 or (773) 288-5462
learngrowconnect.org

Chicago Botanic Garden
Glencoe
Have a composting question?
Call weekdays (847) 818-2901 or (847) 298-3502
chicago-botanic.org

Growing Power Urban Farm
Milwaukee, WI
(414) 527-1546 or (773) 486-6005
growingpower.org

Smart Farm
Barrington
smartfarms.org

The Talking Farm
Skokie
thetalkingfarm.org

Compost Related Products

Abundant Earth
Can O’Worms worm bin
abundantearth.com

Compost Bins
hayneedle.com

Compost Mania
compostmania.com

Visit swancc.org for additional information.
Composting Ordinance by Community
Backyard composting may be regulated by your community. It is important to follow the requirements in your relative code.

**Arlington Heights**
All compost shall be maintained using approved composting procedures for gardening and landscaping purposes. The Arlington Heights Park District is exempt from these requirements.
- All compost shall be located in a compost container as permitted in this Section, unless the sheet composting method is being utilized.
- No more than three compost containers shall be allowed on properties of ½ acre or less.
- Compost containers shall be located only in the side yard or rear yard. For properties of ½ acre or less, such containers must be placed a minimum of five feet from the property line or 25 feet from neighboring dwellings. For properties in excess of ½ acre, such containers must be located a minimum of 25 feet from neighboring dwellings. Where a side lot line is adjacent to a street, any compost container must adhere to the setback requirement for the principal structure.
- Items such as, but not limited to, the following organic materials are allowed in the compost pile: soil, grass clippings, waste sod, wood chips, shredded paper, egg shells, coffee grounds, straw, leaves, cooked and uncooked fruits and vegetables. Small amounts of activators may be added to facilitate the process.
- Compost shall not contain household garbage, meat or any meat product, fatty food, bones, animal feces, diseased plants, treated wood, manure, or non-plant materials.
- Compost shall be maintained to prevent the harboring and breeding of animals and offensive odors by frequent turning of the compost material to permit aeration.
- Newer composting techniques or devices may be permitted if they are reviewed and approved by the Director of Building and Health Services, with the advice of the Environmental Commission.

**Barrington**
Compost piles/structures are allowable in the rear yard provided they are not within 10 feet of any property line.

**Buffalo Grove**
No specific regulations. Follow International Property Maintenance Code.

**Elk Grove Village**
Compostable materials such as grass, trimmings, wood waste, leaves, weeds and other garden refuse may be placed in a compost pile, provided it is placed in such a way so the material will not be windblown. The depositing of garbage, pet waste, meat scraps or other materials that may attract animals or vermin to the compost pile, or which may produce an obnoxious odor, shall be prohibited.

Compost piles shall only be permitted in rear yards, except that portion of the rear yard wherein a drainage easement exists, and in no case shall a compost pile be located in any side yard. Compost piles shall be no more than five feet (5’) in height, and shall not have a maximum ground or base area of more than one hundred (100) square feet. (Ord. 2121, 8-14-1990)  

**Evanston**
Detached accessory buildings, structures and uses: Accessory buildings, structures or uses shall be permitted as provided in Table 4-A of this Section and detached accessory buildings, structures, or uses in a residential district shall:
- Cover no more than forty (40) percent of a rear yard when located in a rear yard. However, in no case shall the maximum lot coverage requirement for the zoning district be exceeded.
- Not be located in a side yard abutting a street or interior side yard between the principal structure and the side lot line.
- Not be located between the building line and the principal structure (except as permitted in front yards). Compost piles are permitted in rear yards in both residential and nonresidential districts.

library.municode.com/index.aspx?clientId=14913&stateId=13&stateName=Illinois

**Glencoe**
No specific regulations. Follow International Property Maintenance Code.

**Glenview**
No specific regulations. Follow International Property Maintenance Code.

**Hoffman Estates**
- Compost piles or bins may be located only in side or rear yards.
- Compost piles or bins cannot be placed or constructed in such a way so as to allow materials to be windblown.
- Compost piles or bins cannot emit odorous matter in such quantities as to be readily detectable at any point along lot lines, or so as to produce a public nuisance or hazard beyond lot lines.
- A large amount of grass clippings or branches next to a tree is not compost or mulch. There are several ways to construct compost piles and many types of composting bins are available at retail establishments. Piles should be placed on level ground in a sheltered, well-drained area, out of constant direct sunlight. However, they should not be placed in constantly shaded areas, such as under trees. Be considerate of your neighbors and choose a spot out of direct view.


Verify compost codes with your community for the most up to date information.
Alternative disposal of landscape waste is allowed as specified in this subsection. Alternative methods of disposing of landscape waste providing that it does not exceed seven days. It shall be unlawful to place or permit to remain any building material, garbage or other material that may attract animals or vermin or which may provide an obnoxious odor shall be prohibited. A compost pile shall not be placed in any required front yard as defined by the village zoning ordinance, and shall be set back a minimum of three feet from the side yard lot line, set back a minimum of five feet from any rear lot line, and shall not be located less than 30 feet from any neighboring residential dwelling structure. In no event shall a compost pile be located in any side or rear yard drainage or utility easement. A compost pile shall be no more than 36 inches in height, and shall not exceed a maximum ground area of 10 square feet. Section 302.4.1
Palatine
- Size of compost bins should be limited to 4x4x4
- A maximum of three (3) compost bins will be allowed on residential properties. Bins need to be made of commercial grade material, and barrel type containers are also acceptable.
- Yard waste should primarily make up compost piles.
- Items that are prohibited include: Oils, grease and lard, Meat, bones and fish. Dairy products. Human or animal waste Inorganic materials.
- All compost also are required to be enclosed in a freestanding compost bin and be maintained to deter pests.

Compost piles and bins are allowed only in rear yards of residential properties, and must be set back from 5-feet from rear and side property lines, and 25 feet away from neighboring homes. Other locations may be reviewed by the Director of Community Services Department. (Ord. #0-63-13 - Sec. 10-3.8)

Park Ridge
No specific regulations. Follow International Property Maintenance Code.

Prospect Heights
Properly maintained compost piles may be utilized by single-family units for gardening and landscaping purposes. Such may be located in the side or backyard, the farthest distance possible on site from neighboring residential structures, patios and swimming pools, a minimum of five feet (5’) from the property line. Compost piles shall not contain household garbage and must be regularly maintained by turning the composting material to permit aeration and/or by application of chemicals to induce rapid decomposition and prevent offensive odors. (Ord. 0-90-26, 7-2-1990)

Rolling Meadows
No specific regulations. Follow International Property Maintenance Code.

Skokie
- Compost piles shall not contain any materials other than landscape waste.
- Compost piles shall only be located in a rear yard, and shall be placed a minimum of 5 feet away from all property lines.
- Compost piles shall be in compliance with all regulations set forth by the Village Manager.

South Barrington
No specific regulations. Follow International Property Maintenance Code. To satisfy the appropriate zoning setback requirements, residents are to follow their zoning codes relative to their home, typically 25-35 feet.

Wheeling
No specific regulations. Follow International Property Maintenance Code.

Wilmette
Compostable materials such as grass trimmings, wood waste, leaves, weeds, and other garden refuse may be placed in a compost pile, provided that it is enclosed in a fence, box or other barrier or container equal in height to the compost pile and in a manner to prevent materials from being wind-blown. Said fence or box shall not exceed 100 square feet in area and shall not exceed five feet in height. The container shall be set back from the lot line equal to the setback for accessory buildings and shall not be located in the front or side yard, or on a drainage or utility easement. The depositing of garbage, pet waste, meat scraps or other materials that may attract animals or vermin to the compost pile or which may produce an obnoxious odor shall be prohibited.

Any compost pile shall be maintained in accordance with Illinois Department of Energy and Natural Resources guide entitled, “A Homeowner’s Guide to Recycling Yard Wastes,” (reference numbers ILENR/RR-89/03 and XO4628-650M-3-90) as hereafter may be amended from time to time, which is incorporated herein by reference. In the event of a conflict between said guide and the provisions of this code, the code shall supersede the guide and shall govern the maintenance of compost piles to the extent of the conflict. Failure to maintain said compost pile as specified under Section 7-7-4, shall constitute a nuisance as specified under Chapter 14 of the Village Code.

Examples of International Property Maintenance Code:
- All accessory structures, including detached garages, fences and walls, shall be maintained structurally sound and in good repair.
- All exterior property and premises shall be maintained in a clean, safe and sanitary condition. The occupant shall keep that part of the exterior property which such occupant occupies or controls in a clean and sanitary condition.
- The exterior of a structure shall be maintained in good repair, structurally sound and sanitary so as not to pose a threat to the public health, safety or welfare.
- All structures and exterior property shall be kept free from rodent harborage and infestation. Where rodents are found, they shall be promptly exterminated by approved processes which will not be injurious to human health. After pest elimination, proper precautions shall be taken to eliminate rodent harborage and prevent reinestation.
- All structures shall be kept free from insect and rodent infestation. All structures in which insects or rodents are found shall be promptly exterminated by approved processes that will not be injurious to human health. After pest elimination, proper precautions shall be taken to prevent reinestation.

Verify compost codes with your community for the most up to date information.