

The 5 Stages You Will Experience When You Compost

Or how I stopped tossing and cleaned up my wastestream

Becoming a composter is a journey like any other, though occasionally you get a worm roast.

Stage 1: That's not me

I don't compost because I don't compost

Stage 1 is hard to move beyond because stage 1 is about my identity. Stage 1 is looking at the composter in the store and thinking, "I have no idea how compost works. Ida's great at gardening, but I'll never be that good at gardening. It's just not me." I've been there. From the outside, composting looks like a mysterious science that only hardcore gardeners use. **Not True.**

I grew up with one trash can in the kitchen and everything went into that can and up to the curb. One can and done! Most Americans live this way - you get the food from the store, toss the packaging and the leftovers into the same bin, and then say, "*adios, basura!*" Your garbage takes a journey to the landfill with everyone else's packaging and leftovers. That's right, we know what you're up to because waste collectors measure your footprint. [The National Geographic Channel](#) and other sources agree that the average American produces 4.4 pounds of trash *each day*. That's like throwing away a full-grown cat every day. If you're doing the math with me, you'll get to 1.6 *tons* of trash per *person*, per year.

I also know the stories I told myself so that I didn't have to change. They must sort the trash at the dump, right? Not always, and not here in Thurston County ([but check out this cool project in Delaware County!](#)). What goes in the can goes by railcar to our landfill in [Columbia Gorge](#) where it is buried underground and forced to break down - without air - alongside thousands of tons of waste from our neighbors. And from our not- neighbors: [Roosevelt Landfill](#) across the Cascades also collects garbage from California, Idaho, British Columbia, and Alaska.

Stage 2: I should compost, but I don't know how.

Trash is trash, except when it's not.

Let's bring this all back to composting. Your food goes to a landfill and is buried with plastic wrappers, mostly finished coffee drinks, lids, straws, bags, receipts -you get the idea. Without air or life to do the work of turning those nutrients into energy, the food waste breaks down slowly and releases methane gas. Out of the 251 million tons of garbage Americans collect each year, around 30 million pounds are food waste. Breaking down, food waste [produces 34% of methane emissions each year](#). If you understand climate change science, you see where this is going - beachfront property in Arizona.

But when food or organic waste is broken down *aerobically*, with oxygen and creepy-crawlies, you produce [more CO2 and less methane](#). Methane is *twenty-one times* worse for our atmosphere than CO2 in the context of climate change, sooo...less is good!

How can we make less methane? Me, I waited to compost until we moved into a house, because you need a yard to compost, right? (False: learn more about [small space composting here](#), or check out my “worm bins” below) Remember too, I’m not *that* person.



That time when I forgot to clean the yard and made compost by mistake. Oops?

Important side note alert! You can have your food and yard waste picked up for you. [Set up a green bin through the City of Olympia or LeMay](#), or find a local hauler. [Oly Sunrise Compost Concierge](#) is completely bike powered and a locally owned small business. If you can eat it or find it outside, you can green-bin it.

Compost Recipe

We'll get into the nitty gritty soon, but here's the recipe for compost.

[Cook it in a bin, cook it in a pile, cook it underground, this could take a while.](#)

Ingredients

2 parts 'Brown'

1 part 'Green'

Air and Water

Directions

Stir weekly and you'll be feeding happy microbes and bugs. Those bugs will thank you with dark, crumbly, rich compost. Spread wherever you see dirt and enjoy.

Stage 3: I'll try composting, but I won't be good at it

I mean, people compost, right? So, what's my holdup?

You might think, "Ohhh, look - a composter that turns itself! There's one where you can pull compost from the bottom! Maybe now I can do something!" You are ready, young padawan.

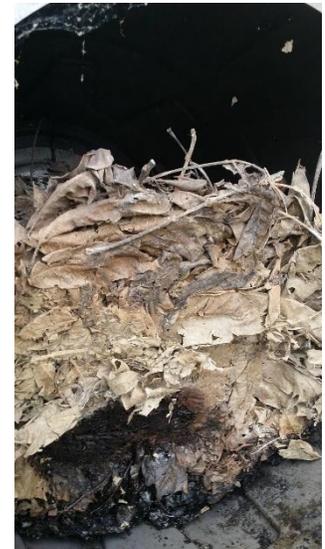
Let's begin.



Antique Leaves

It's time to pick a pile. I'll tell you something I never knew: there is no right way to compost. Here is my first attempt, 4 times around the sun later. I added a bushel of sticks and yard debris to a tumbler composter and proceeded to ignore the entire setup for months at a time. I will let you in on a secret: when I think that I am not good at something, I put that something off. There will always be a later or a next spring, too. I *finally* had to check my compost to write this article, and this is what I saw.

My tumbler compost suffers to this day from too many 'browns'. The leaves you see have been in that tumbler for almost 4 years and, yup, still leaves: no compost. Except perhaps that darker bit you see peeking out from under the pile. The tumbler *has* been a great way to keep those leaves around the house though.



There must be at least 3 cats inside this thing..

We hardly notice this bin in our small yard. We forgot about it for years, after all. No crying over spilled milk, we have 'cats' to save. You can go open pile or get a container for your first compost attempt; [here's your quick and dirty](#) on where to put your dirty, your moldy, and all those extra bits of paper.

Browns

'Brown' materials are rich with the carbon you need to feed the microbes working in your compost heap. [Brown items include](#) paper, leaves, cardboard, hay/straw, eggshells, tea bags, sawdust, and wood ashes. You know, things that are... brown!

You need 2-3 times as many browns as greens to get your breakdown on.

Stage 4: I *can* do this!

Get it? Can??

You've dipped your toes into the pool and you're heading for the shallow end. Maybe you want to be able to look that compost pile in the face again. At this stage, you're ready for some formal training. Dive into the blogs, get lost in infographics, and then test your questions at a compost workshop. [We're having one this Thursday, May 10, at the Lacey Timberland Library!](#) I personally went a little overboard - I signed on as a [Thurston County Master Recycler Composter](#). I learned a new skill and I get to work with great people - gardeners, non-gardeners, and cat people - doing what we can every day to make the earth a little cleaner. I opened two more compost bins and committed.



If Darth Vader were a compost bin.

Try it again, you might get better!

I inherited a new bin from a neighbor for a fresh start! After throwing in some leaves and soil, I'm ready to add food scraps. This bin continually suffers from not enough browns, but breaks down material relatively quickly. I can open the bottom of the pile and see deep black soil building up through the mound. With too many food scraps, fruit flies collect here and there's a sweet smell close by - but certainly not something that stops us from playing in the front yard. Gee, I wish I knew where I could find a pile of carbon rich browns to speed decomposition along....

Greens

'Green' materials are full of nitrogen and are a vital protein source for happy little microbes. Greens include: your food waste, weeds, used coffee grounds, certain manures, seaweed, and other fresh plant cuttings. Don't throw that cat out today: fur is a great addition to your pile. Chop, slice, or shred your greens so your microbes can do their work quickly.

You might realize by now that you produce **a lot** of green in your house. Here are a few things that greens are not:

- Meat, grease, dairy, and bones will attract rats and maggots to your pile, so keep these separate.
- Dog, cat, human, and horse poop can spread parasites or disease, so trash them or keep a separate pile for stall muck and shavings.
- Stubborn weeds will grow, so don't put them here unless you want to see them again in a week.





Happy little buggers

I ran into other issues, too. I noticed that rotting slowed last summer. After a few weeks, I remembered to add water. My compost was so much happier! I can also tell you that my pile is never running at peak because I often forget to 'turn' the pile - especially when it's cold and rainy! Turning once each week will keep your compost wriggly, and it's important to get air to your food scraps so that decomposition can happen in an aerobic environment. Mixing up your materials will bring in air to complete your rot squad support system: **2 parts browns, 1 part green, air, and water.**

Stage 5: Your compost is now part of the family

worms make great pets

Vermicompost

My house is the coolest house on the block. We don't have a playground, we don't have a pool. As soon as we step outside, all the kids run over to see my worms. They beg me to open the bin, where we dig in to find happy red wigglers hard at work. I introduce the kids to my whole team: worms, springtails, centipedes, and all manner of tiny monsters. They squeal as worms seek some shade and dive back into the depths. If you treasure hunt, you might find a tiny worm egg. We don't tell them about the worm-pocalypse that happened when I left my bin out in the sun last summer. We just reload some garden soil, shredded paper, and a little food scrap.



My worm bin brings all the kids to the yard.



The bottom of the compost bin



worm cement



Better than an ice cream truck

The neighborhood munchkins help me to harvest the compost, too. We spread the compost over a tarp on a sunny day and pick out handfuls of knotted worms to reclaim as we scoop the finished compost into a new bucket. When our first compost dried out, I could see that we had too much paper and not enough food; little grey globs of cement now decorate my garden. We

checked on the worms today and they're plugging away at a newly bedded bin, red and happy and plump.

Meet the Rot Squad

Worms, springtails, centipedes eat the microbes that decompose your scrap and poop castings. You have an entire ecosystem doing the hard work for you. When building your vermicompost bin, or worm bin, pull red wigglers from your garden or give yourself a headstart with worms from The Olympia Farmers' Market.



Look what I found in the yard! You might mistake the brown earthworm for a large root. Just below the blade of grass, a red wiggler wants back in his tunnel.

Learn more and design your worm bin with this guide!

<https://lancaster.unl.edu/pest/resources/vermicompost107.shtml>

In stage 5 you will find yourself doing the unimaginable to keep your compost team happy. My friend picks up leaves (browns) with her kid at preschool. I ask babysitters to bring used coffee grounds to work. Banana peels make it home from a full day of shopping to be added to my pile. The compost speaks to you: it gets smelly or *sluggish* when it needs help, and you can give your pile the nudge it needs to get moving again. It's not about getting it right - now you are composting to see what you can save - and what you can create.



Bring me worms, little human

To get to stage 5 you will experience stages 2 and 3. This is all of us and I'm here to tell you that I think you are that person - the kind of person who is ready to take responsibility for their garbage habit. The kind of person who can compost as easily as you recycle. The kind of composter - dare I say *master* composter - who can look out to their backyard and proudly announce to the world, "I only throw out half a cat a day now."

Maybe in the far off future, you'll be a [Master Gardener](#), too.