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Low Cost Composting

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GARDEN NOTES

LOW COST COMPOSTING

By Dennis Hinkamp

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General-01

In some social circles, talking about garbage has become acceptable dinner conversation. The age-old parental admonishment has changed from, “clean your plate” to “save that for the compost pile.”

Before the advent of the community landfill, the garbage disposal and giant trash cans scooped up by robotic-armed garbage trucks, each household was responsible for its own garbage. The best way to keep from becoming neck deep in your own potato peels and leaves was to form a compost heap. In less harried times a compost heap was just that—a pile or trench where garbage was allowed to rot unfettered by catalog-driven, compulsive composting over achievers.

Pick up any home or gardening catalog now and you are confronted with a cornucopia of devices to compost everything in the cornucopia in record time. For instance, the Lincoln Town Car of composters is the Solar Powered Tumbler for a mere \$400.

Given that most people are still not sure what to do with the compost once they have it, it is hard to imagine how you would ever get back your \$400 investment in compost, says Kitt Farrell-Poe, environmental engineering Extension specialist at Utah State University. The only advantage to these kinds of machines is that you can get usable compost in 3-4 weeks, whereas it takes up to six months for some other methods.

Composting should be a low-cost, low-maintenance activity, Farrell-Poe says. It may be less aesthetically pleasing and take longer, but one simple method is to just make a pile in a corner of the yard. You may need to cover it in the winter to help it maintain some heat during the winter or just accept that the pile will just be dormant until spring.

Farrell-Poe says there are plenty of guides to composting available, but the basics are: compost organic materials only (no meat or dairy products, synthetic products or plastics), add water if the pile dries out and turn or aerate frequently.

If you want something a little more contained than a pile, there are plenty of low-cost materials that lend themselves to composting, she says. Trash cans left over from before cities started supplying them make great composters. Chicken wire, old fencing material or discarded wooden pallets are also great low-cost materials to enclose your compost pile.

If your compost pile stinks, there is something wrong. Given heat, water and air, most organic materials break down quickly without a lot of odor. If you have ever left grass clippings in sealed trash bags for a couple of days or more, and then smelled them, you will get a good idea of what is happening in a compost pile that is not adequately aerated, she says.

If you decide to go up-scale with your composting, store-bought composters can have the advantage of quick turn around times for creating compost, but you do still need to water and turn them, Farrell-Poe says. Some of the fancier composters remove some of the guess work and labor which should help in making composting a lifelong habit.

She says there are two basic types: tumblers and bins. Tumblers pivot on an axle or roll on the ground to make turning the compost easier. They can cost anywhere from \$100 up to the \$400 mentioned for the solar-powered model. Bins generally start at about \$40. In general, the tumbler types are the fastest and easiest to extract the compost. The black plastic bins are slower mainly because they require more work to turn the composting material. Plus, with a bin, it's a little harder to extract the composted material from the bottom.

If you really want to be able to compost all your kitchen scraps including meat and dairy products, you should consider a worm bin, Farrell-Poe says. If you keep worms above 40 degrees Fahrenheit, and give them a steady supply of scraps, they can compost up to seven pounds of food a week. And, I suppose, do double duty as fishing bait later on.

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office](#).

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