

What Can You Compost?

You've probably found yourself standing in the kitchen, holding a piece of food waste, wondering, "Can this go in the compost?" Some things are obvious. Others? Not so much. Let's break it down with a clear guide to what belongs in your compost bin and what should be avoided.

The Basics: Greens and Browns

All compostable items can be classified into two categories: Greens and Browns. These are the key ingredients for creating healthy, balanced compost.

Greens (Nitrogen-rich, usually wet):

- Fruit and vegetable scraps
- Coffee grounds
- Fresh grass clippings
- Plant trimmings
- Tea leaves

Browns (Carbon-rich, usually dry):

- Dry leaves
- Torn-up cardboard
- Non-glossy paper
- Wood chips
- Straw

A healthy compost pile requires a balanced ratio of both. If there are too many greens, it will become slimy and smelly. Too many browns, and it will dry out and decompose slowly.

General Rule: Aim for 3 parts browns to 1 part greens by volume for optimal composting conditions.

Yes, Compost These (Greens)

Fruit Scraps:

- Apple cores
- Banana peels

- Citrus peels (use sparingly due to acidity)
- Berry stems
- Melon rinds
- Stone fruit pits (they take longer to break down but won't harm the compost)

Vegetable Scraps:

- Potato peels
- Carrot tops
- Onion skins (limit in quantity)
- Garlic skins (limit in quantity)
- Lettuce and salad scraps
- Corn cobs and husks
- Pepper cores and seeds
- Tomato stems

Coffee and Tea:

- Coffee grounds (a great nitrogen source)
- Paper coffee filters
- Tea leaves
- Tea bags (ensure any staples are removed; some bags contain plastic—check the packaging)

Other Greens:

- Fresh grass clippings
- Healthy plant trimmings
- Weeds (as long as they haven't gone to seed)
- Houseplant trimmings
- Fresh flowers

Yes, Compost These (Browns)

Paper Products:

- Newspaper (non-glossy)
- Cardboard (torn into pieces)
- Paper egg cartons
- Paper bags
- Shredded paper
- Paper plates (uncoated)

Yard Waste:

- Dry leaves
- Straw and hay
- Wood chips and sawdust (untreated wood only)
- Pine needles (use sparingly due to acidity)
- Small twigs and branches

Other Browns:

- Eggshells (crushed for faster breakdown)
- Nut shells (except walnut—toxic to some plants)
- Cotton and wool scraps (100% natural only)
- Wine corks (natural cork, not synthetic)
- Hair and fur

Do NOT Compost These (Traditional Composting)

Avoid these items in your traditional compost pile:

- Meat and fish: Attract pests (rodents, raccoons, flies) and produce unpleasant odors.
- Dairy products: Cause the same issues as meat—cheese, milk, yogurt, butter, etc.
- Oils and fats: Coat materials, preventing decomposition and attracting pests.
- Bones: Take years to break down and can attract animals.

- Pet waste (dog, cat): Contains harmful pathogens that can affect humans. Different from herbivore manure.
- Diseased plants: Can spread disease to your garden if the pile doesn't reach high temperatures.
- Treated wood: Contains harmful chemicals that don't break down and can harm plants.
- Coal or charcoal ash: Contains chemicals toxic to plants (different from wood ash).
- Synthetic materials: Plastics, synthetic fabrics, rubber—these will not break down.
- Glossy paper: Contains plastic and chemicals—magazines, catalogs, and coated paper.

The Bottom Line

When in doubt, ask yourself: "Is this natural, and will it break down?"