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Copy: DOWN TO EARTH CHOICES  
.....or??! HITTING PAYDIRT

Journalist: Pam Asheton, Box 15, Site 11, R.R.1  
Cochrane, Alberta, T4C 1A1

Contact: 403-932-6396  
Email at [Sunwired@hotmail.com](mailto:Sunwired@hotmail.com)

Composting is a hot issue these days and actually dead simple. In fact, when a compost heap hits the right conditions the core temperature will begin to heat up (in running terms referred to as an 'aerobic' type) actually feeling hot to the touch, and at peak performance will reach temperatures of 60-70 degrees Centigrade (around 160 Fahrenheit).

'Dead' too is a real misnomer, this living organism is cooking! Mimicking Mother Nature, organic wastes are broken down through a combination of biological and chemical processes. Biological agents (worms, insects, fungi and bacteria chew up the materials which are then further transformed by oxidation (exposure to air), reduction and hydrolysis (exposure to water).

Composting, too, can have a certain mystique for the amateur, frightening almost to begin. Where do you begin, what can you put in, what not?

Practically ENVIRONMENT CANADA gets to the essential basics of building a compost heap - three are critical, they say. You'll need, they remark, "A lid that protects the pile from rain and snow and allows you to control how much moisture gets in" (your pile wants to be kept moist but not drenched – if building your compost heap with porous materials like bricks or concrete blocks, do though drench them first before adding your compost material so they won't 'draw' moisture away from the pile).

Critical, too, is air ventilation and for this you'll need to consider holes or vents. One gardener I spoke to uses perforated drainage tubing as well as steel wire mesh rolled into tubes at the base of her compost heap structure although she emphasized these can make her weekly 'turning' (with a fork, again for aeration) a more delicate procedure. A Bird's Nest Bin (also known as the binless bin) is, on the other hand, "a naturally constructed structure that you build out of large coarse plant materials that you have around the yard" (this appeals mightily to my own creed-of-living). You take big stalky stuff like broccoli and kale, prunings from bushes, sunflower stalks and their like – on the outside of the structure you

pound four stakes (don't use treated wood which is toxic and can contain arsenic) into a square shape roughly four to six feet in diameter. Around the perimeter lay down the coarse materials (which easily let in air) in a crisscross pattern to make an initial wall 8-10 inches thick – the center of the pile is reserved for the small stuff and food waste from your kitchen, little weeds, even fruit rotting from orchard trees - remembering to cover up any food waste so not to invite animals – and layering with weeds, wood chips or/and straw. And, of course, dried fall leaves – many fanatics will even cruise back town alleys gathering black plastic bags neat freaks have gathered and put out as garbage!

For this type of 'bin' you keep the 'walls' higher than the center; once it's a few feet high you let it stand and simply start another. The interior regions will have become a glorious rich dark compost ready to enrich your garden – as a time frame roughly anywhere from a year onwards.

Practically, for more conventional compost heaps ENVIRONMENT CANADA recommends “a means of removing the final product.” It's a useful thought; is there room, say, to slide in your wheelbarrow so you can actually distribute this largesse to your grateful flower and vegetable gardens? These days nearly all local recycling centers (both town and country) will be encouraging composting, running classes even, as well as supplying composters of various types too – prices are around the \$10-20 and often hugely cheaper than gardening centers. Also practically, given Alberta's extremes of climate consider the options of easy access to your compost heap and where you establish it. If the weather is blowing a blizzard your pail of kitchen vegetable peelings you've collected for a few days under your sink cupboard (a recent article in the Calgary Herald by garden consultant Donna Balzer helpfully mentioned her using Biobags to line her collecting bucket, and which are completely biodegradable) may not be so appealing if that same compost heap is a major –40 degree hike to the far-flung remote corners of your backyard.

**SIDEBAR>>'WET' ITEMS TEND TO HAVE HIGHER NITROGEN WASTES, items such as coffee grounds, vegetable scraps, fruit wastes and grains, grass clippings, hair, manure, weeds and eggshells.**

**'DRY' ITEMS HAVE HIGHER CARBON CONTENT, such as hay, leaves, corncobs, pine needles, sawdust, straw and vegetable stalks.**

**COMPOST HEAPS' micro-army needs variety, known by experienced gardeners as a C/N ratio, a balance between nitrogen and carbon energy. Simply use alternate layers of both wet and dry items, then throw in a intervening layer of dirt; just remember too much of anything is not necessarily a good thing so try to diversify your compost heap as much as possible and you'll be fine.**

Canada actually has a COMPOSTING COUNCIL - a national non-profit, member-driven organization with an official charter to “advocate and advance composting and compost usage.” Their website as [www.compost.org](http://www.compost.org) is comprehensive and hugely helpful (or telephone at freephone 1-877-571-4769).

**SIDEBAR>> GENERALLY SPEAKING it’s not a good idea to ever include in your compost heap plants that have ever indicated any sign of disease. Coal and barbecue ashes, too, are considered high in both sulphur and iron and that are plant-toxic. Also avoid adding coloured magazines or coloured newspaper inserts because of their again-toxic chemical breakdown.**

Vermiculture (worm composting) is also gaining huge street cred these days, even sometimes being referred to as “organic garbage disposals.” The worms are either ‘red wigglers’ or ‘brown nosed’ (earthworms will die in this kind of environment) and can be purchased at garden supply stores, bait shops and worm farms, and live in paper bedding into which kitchen scraps are placed. Here they eat both paper and kitchen waste while producing extremely highly nutritious ‘worm castings’.

Amazingly, enthusiastic worm devotees will often keep their productions under kitchen sinks (these worms hate light and here are in opaque plastic containers); outside well-insulated options are also possible for the more squeamish. Worms apparently don’t like to be disturbed, either, by loud noises or abrupt movements and vibrations.

And, if you talk to your plants (as many people do), there’s no earthly reason why worms won’t be encouraged in their efforts either.

#### **RESOURCES:**

1. Composting Council of Canada at [www.compost.org](http://www.compost.org) or telephone 1-877-571-4769
2. [www.recycle.ab.ca](http://www.recycle.ab.ca)
3. for information on vermiculture (worm composting) an excellent website is [www.wormwoman.com](http://www.wormwoman.com) or the equally practical [www.mastercomposter.com](http://www.mastercomposter.com)