

10 Things you should not put in your composter

1. Dog and Cat Poop

Horse, cow, chicken and rabbit droppings are great additions to your compost pile. They will add nutrients and organic matter that will benefit your soil. However, it is not advisable to add the poop from dogs and cats (and other carnivores) to your compost. Their waste often contains microorganisms and parasites that you do not want to introduce to the crops you will be eating.

If you do want to compost your dog and cat poop, you must process them separately from your regular compost pile (there are special composters just for pet waste), and only use the resulting compost on non-food crops.

2. Tea and Coffee Bags

Coffee grounds and tea leaves definitely belong in a compost pile. They provide generous amounts of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium, which are elements that are essential to plants. However, coffee grounds and tea leaves should only be added to compost if they are bag-less, or have been removed from their bags.

The bags that some coffee and tea products come in contain synthetic fibers that do not break down in a compost pile, and can contain chemicals you don't want in your soil.

Don't compost tea or coffee bags unless you are certain they are made from natural materials, like cotton or hemp.

3. Citrus Peels and Onions

While fruit and vegetables scraps from the kitchen are fundamental ingredients in a home compost pile, there are two iffy exceptions: citrus peel and onions.

"What?!" you say? Unfortunately, the natural chemicals and acidity in citrus peels and onions can kill worms and other microorganisms, which can slow down the decomposition in your pile. Plus, unless you chop them into tiny bits, citrus peels take forever to break down, which will delay how soon you can use your compost.

If you only occasionally throw citrus peels and onion scraps into your compost bin, it's no big deal, but if you vermicompost or have worm bins (which is an amazingly convenient and odor-free way to compost if you are in an apartment), then citrus peels, onions and garlic scraps are a no-no, because they will harm your worms.

(Personally, I usually put my onion scraps into the freezer to use when I make stock, and use citrus peels to make non-toxic DIY house cleaning sprays instead.)

4. Fish and Meat Scraps

While technically they will decompose just fine, you really don't want to add fish and meat scraps to the compost pile. Fish and meat are organic and will add nutrients to your garden, but unfortunately their smell will act like a magnet for any rats, mice, foxes, raccoons, or cats in the neighborhood (or even coyotes and bears, depending on

where you live), who will ransack the compost to eat them.

The stink of rotting meat and fish could also really annoy you and your neighbors, too!

5. Glossy or Coated Paper

Many paper products are potential compost fodder, especially soy-ink newspapers, old paper towels and tissues and even shredded cardboard. They are from trees, after all!

However, paper that has been treated with plastic-like coatings to make it bright, colorful and glossy, like magazines, won't decompose properly, contains toxins, and is not appropriate for your compost pile.

6. Sticky Labels on Fruits and Vegetables

Those obnoxious little sticky labels and price tags on fruit and vegetables are made of "food-grade" plastic or vinyl, and do not biodegrade. (See Glossy Paper, above.) They are also easy to miss, which means they often end up trashing up your compost piles. Municipal composters can't handle them, either. In fact, at least one waste management company says PLU produce stickers are their biggest source of compost contamination.

Try to remove these stickers from fruit and veggie scraps before you put them in the compost pile.

7. Coal Fire Ash

The ash from coal fires or charcoal-briquet fires should not be added to your compost pile, as it contains so much sulfur as to make the soil excessively acidic, which will harm your plants. Also, many charcoal briquets are treated with chemicals you really don't want in your compost, your garden or your food.

Wood fire ash from the fireplace can be added in moderation, but please put the coal and charcoal-briquet ash in the trash bin.

8. Sawdust From Treated Wood

While sawdust from untreated, natural woods can be a great addition to compost, if the wood has been treated with any kind of pressure treatment, varnish, stain or paint, you should never add the sawdust to your compost pile.

These toxic compounds won't break down in the composting process and can get into the soil, negatively affecting microorganism activity and plant health. The sawdust from pressure treated wood alone contains arsenic and cadmium—two toxins you definitely don't want in your garden or your food!

Sawdust from treated wood also takes a very long time to break down because it is protected from decay by the chemicals put on it, which will delay how soon you can use your compost on the garden.

9. Large Branches

Large branches take forever to break down and will greatly delay your ability to use

your compost in the garden. It may be a little extra work to cut down or chip your branches for the compost pile, but the smaller the pieces you add to your compost, the faster they will break down.

Alternatively, you can start a branch pile at the back of your lot, where you simply pile branches and let them rot over the course of a couple of years. Branch piles also make great habitat for small creatures and snakes too, so be aware of your local fauna before you start one.

10. Synthetic Fertilizer

Synthetic fertilizers (like the blue Miracle stuff) introduce high levels of inorganic elements into the garden ecosystem. Like taking a generic multivitamin instead of eating real, whole food, the form in which these synthetic fertilizers provide nutrients to the soil can actually kill the microorganisms in your compost and your soil, which will ultimately affect the health of your plants.

Compounds in synthetic fertilizers, such as heavy metals, will also leach through the soil into the water table, as well as upset the natural balance of nutrients in the soil and increase salinity.

100 Things You Can Compost

The following list is meant to get you thinking about your compost possibilities. Imagine how much trash we could prevent from going into the landfills if each of us just decided to compost a few more things!

(G) refers to items that are mostly “green” or nitrogenous, or that decompose very quickly; (B) refers to items that are mostly “brown” or carbonaceous, or that take much longer to decompose.

From the Kitchen

1. Fruit and vegetable scraps (G)
2. Egg shells (crushed) (B)
3. Coffee grounds (G)
4. Coffee filters (B)
5. Tea bags (Make sure they are made of natural materials like hemp or cotton, and not rayon or other synthetics. If in doubt, just open it and compost the tea leaves alone.) (B)
6. Loose leaf tea (G)
7. Spoiled soy/rice/almond/coconut milk (G)
8. Used paper napkins and paper towels (B)
9. Unwaxed cardboard pizza boxes (ripped or cut into small pieces) (B)
10. Paper bags (shredded) (B)
11. The crumbs you sweep off of the counters and floors (B)
12. Cooked pasta (G)
13. Cooked rice (G)
14. Stale bread, pitas, or tortillas (B)
15. Stale tortilla chips or potato chips (B)
16. Spoiled pasta sauce or tomato paste (G)
17. Crumbs from the bottom of snack food packaging (B)
18. Paper towel rolls (shredded) (B)
19. Stale crackers (B)
20. Stale cereal (B)
21. Cardboard boxes from cereal, pasta, etc. (Remove any plastic windows and shred) (B)
22. Used paper plates (as long as they don't have a waxy coating) (B)
23. Nut shells (except for walnut shells, which are toxic to plants) (B)
24. Spoiled tofu and tempeh (G)
25. Seaweed, kelp or nori (G)
26. Unpopped, burnt popcorn kernels (B)
27. Old herbs and spices (G)
28. Stale pretzels (B)
29. Stale candy (crushed or chopped) (G)

30. Stale protein or “energy” bars (G)
31. Pizza crusts (B)
32. Old oatmeal (B)
33. Peanut shells (B)
34. Cardboard egg cartons (cut them up) (B)
35. Stale pumpkin, sunflower or sesame seeds (chopped up so they can’t sprout) (G)
36. Avocado pits (chopped up so they don’t sprout) (G)
37. Wine corks (chop up so they decompose faster) (B)
38. Moldy cheese (in moderation) (G)
39. Melted ice cream (in moderation) (G)
40. Old jelly, jam, or preserves (G)
41. Stale beer and wine (G)
42. Toothpicks (B)
43. Bamboo skewers (break them into pieces) (B)
44. Paper cupcake or muffin cups (B)
- 45. From the Bathroom**
46. Used facial tissues (B)
47. Hair from your hairbrush (B)
48. Trimmings from an electric razor (B)
49. Toilet paper rolls (shredded) (B)
50. Old loofahs (cut up, natural only) (B)
51. Nail clippings (B)
52. 100% latex or lambskin condoms (B)
53. 100% cotton cotton balls (B)
54. Cotton swabs made from 100% cotton and cardboard (not plastic sticks) (B)
55. 100% cotton tampons and sanitary pads (including used) (B)
56. Cardboard tampon applicators (B)
57. Menstrual blood (G)
58. Urine (G)
- 59. From the Laundry Room**
60. Dryer lint (from 100% natural fabrics only!) (B)
61. Old cotton clothing and jeans (ripped or cut into small pieces) (B)
62. Cotton fabric scraps (shredded) (B)
63. Old wool clothing (ripped or cut into small pieces) (B)
64. Old cotton towels and sheets (shredded) (B)
- 65. From the Office**
66. Bills and other plain paper documents (shredded) (B)
67. Envelopes (shredded, minus the plastic window) (B)
68. Pencil shavings (B)

- 69. Sticky notes (shredded) (B)
- 70. Old business cards (shredded, as long as they're not glossy) (B)

71. Around the House

- 72. "Dust bunnies" from wood and tile floors (B)
- 73. Contents of your dustpan (pick out any inorganic stuff, like pennies and Legos) (B)
- 74. Crumbs from under your couch cushions (again, pick out any inorganic stuff) (B)
- 75. Newspapers (shredded or torn into smaller pieces) (B)
- 76. Junk mail (shredded, remove coated paper and plastic windows) (B)
- 77. Subscription cards from magazines (shredded) (B)
- 78. Burlap sacks (cut or torn into small pieces) (B)
- 79. Old rope and twine (chopped, natural, unwaxed only) (B)
- 80. Leaves trimmed from houseplants (G)
- 81. Dead houseplants and their soil (B)
- 82. Flowers from floral arrangements (G)
- 83. Natural potpourri (B)
- 84. Used matches (B)
- 85. Ashes from untreated wood burned in the fireplace, grill, or outdoor fire pits (in very small amounts) (B)
- 86. Grass clippings (G)
- 87. Dead autumn leaves (B)
- 88. Sawdust (from plain wood that has NOT been pressure-treated, stained or painted) (B)

89. Party and Holiday Supplies

- 90. Wrapping paper rolls (cut into smaller pieces) (B)
- 91. Paper table cloths (shredded or torn into smaller pieces) (B)
- 92. Crepe paper streamers (shredded) (B)
- 93. Latex balloons (Make sure they are latex!) (B)
- 94. Jack O'lanterns (smashed) (G)
- 95. Those hay bales you used as part of your outdoor fall decor (broken apart) (B)
- 96. Natural holiday wreaths (chop up with pruners first) (B)
- 97. Christmas trees (chop up with pruners first, or use a wood chipper, if you have one...) (B)
- 98. Evergreen garlands (chop up with pruners first) (B)

99. Pet-Related

- 100. Fur from the dog or cat brush (B)
- 101. Droppings and bedding from your herbivorous pet rabbit, gerbil, hamster, etc. (**Do NOT use dog or cat poop.**) (G)
- 102. Newspaper/droppings from the bottom of the bird or snake cage (G)

- 103. Feathers (B)
- 104. Horse, cow or goat manure (G)
- 105. Alfalfa hay or pellets (usually fed to rabbits, gerbils, etc.) (B)
- 106. Dry dog or cat food, fish pellets (B)

Just imagine if all of us kept so many things out of the landfills and returned their nutrients to the earth?

For a truly sustainable future that our great-grandchildren can thrive in, closing the nutrient cycle by composting is essential, or we will deplete our precious soils into dust. Good thing it is such an easy and frugal thing to do!