

nyc compost project tip sheet

get all the dirt at nyc.gov/wasteless/compostproject

Funded and managed by NYC Department of Sanitation's Bureau of Waste Prevention, Reuse & Recycling.

The NYC Compost Project provides compost education and outreach through host sites in all five boroughs. Educational programs include: compost-related workshops and classes, on-site composting demonstrations, compost helpline, and composting technical assistance.



How to Use Compost

finished compost

Finished compost resembles dark, crumbly topsoil and should bear no resemblance to the original materials. Compost should have a pleasant, earthy smell to it. Using “unfinished” or immature material that contains food scraps can attract pests and can cause harm to young plants, so make sure your compost has fully decomposed before adding it to your garden beds.

how to tell if your compost is finished

The simplest way to tell if your compost is mature and ready to use is by doing the “bag test.” Put a handful of moist compost into a zip-lock bag and press out the air before sealing. Leave it for three days, then open the bag. If you detect an ammonia or sour odor, the microorganisms are still at work and you need to let your compost finish curing. Test another sample of compost again in a week.

using finished compost

There are various ways to utilize your finished compost. You can sprinkle compost on top or mix it into your flower and vegetable beds, gently rake compost into tree beds, blend it with potting soil to revitalize indoor plants, or spread it on top of the soil on your lawn as a soil amendment.

compost in the home garden

Adding compost to your garden helps improve the structure and overall health of your soil. It is rich in organic content and as such, will retain moisture and will increase your overall earthworm and microbial population, which will serve as biological controls against unwanted pests. In addition, compost will provide a slow release of macronutrients, which means that your plantings will get a steady supply of nutrients as needed rather than a one shot injection of conventional chemical fertilizers.

USAGE

WHAT TO DO

amending soil



Work one to two inches of compost into the top three to five inches of soil.

growing vegetables



Give your vegetable garden plenty of compost in the fall. Spread several inches of compost on top of the existing bed, then till it in come springtime.

Put a handful of compost in each hole when you're planting.

Once plants begin to grow quickly, you can add a half-inch layer of compost around the base of the plants. Provide “heavy feeder” plants such as tomatoes, corn, and squash with half an inch of compost monthly—this will result in great produce!

growing flowers

In the spring, loosen the top few inches of annual and perennial beds and mix in a one-inch layer of compost. Or in the fall, apply a one-inch layer of compost as a mulch to protect plant roots from freezing and conserve moisture.

replenishing soil in potted plants & window boxes

Even the best potting soil gets depleted of its nutrients as plants grow. To replenish nutrients, add an inch of compost to potted plants and window boxes twice a year. Or, make your own potting soil using two parts screened compost to one part sand or perlite.



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using finished compost

Using Compost for Gardening Projects

USAGE

WHAT TO DO

rejuvenating lawn or turf



When establishing new turf, incorporate up to three inches of compost into the existing soil base. If possible, till to a depth of five to eight inches before seeding. Otherwise, seed directly over the compost.

On existing turf, you can treat bald spots by incorporating an inch of compost into the soil and then reseeding. This will fight compaction and help suppress soil-borne diseases.

You can also topdress existing turf with as much as one-half inch finely screened compost. This is easiest with a spreader, but you can use a shovel for small areas where you want to add compost. Rake the compost evenly throughout the grass area to enable the compost to readily sift down to the soil. The compost will settle down into the soil, improving its structure and providing nutrients. Over time, this will mean less compaction, fewer bald spots, and a reduced need for synthetic fertilizers.

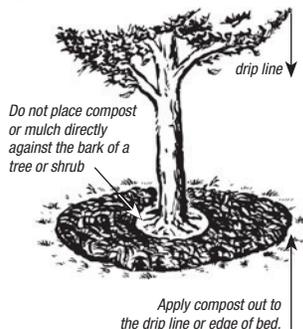
tree planting

When planting a new tree, it's best to work one-half inch to one inch compost into the top two inches of soil from the trunk of the tree out to the dripline—the outermost parameter of the tree's canopy. (See image below)

Compost used in this way serves as a substitute for the layer of organic matter that naturally exists on the forest floor: it provides organic nutrients, reduces moisture loss, and keeps the soil cool.

Don't add compost to a freshly dug hole when planting a new tree, as applying compost in this way will discourage tree roots from going beyond the hole.

tree and shrub maintenance (including nyc street trees)



Apply compost as mulch to trees and shrubs to prevent weeds and make plants more drought resistant. Spread up to two inches of compost under the tree or shrub out to the drip line (the outermost leaves on a tree) or edge of the bed. This will help reduce moisture loss and stabilize soil temperature.

You can also incorporate compost into the soil once or twice a year to provide organic nutrients. Before adding compost to compacted soils, gently cultivate the soil with a hand tool; this will prevent damage to shallow feeder roots while making nutrients more readily accessible to the trees or shrubs.

Do not place compost or mulch directly against the bark of the tree or shrub or on exposed woody roots as this could cause rot and invite pests and disease.

maintaining perennial & annual beds

Spread one to two inches of compost on top in perennial and annual beds in the early spring or fall to prevent weeds from establishing and to make plants more drought-resistant.