

A New Year's Resolution to Compost

The New Year is an excellent time to turn over a new leaf – or a potato peeling... a carrot top... or even an apple core. Winter fruits and vegetables provide a bounty for the compost bin, and surprisingly, winter is as good a time as any to start the composting habit.

“For almost nineteen years, we’ve been happily shrinking our waste via Composting,” enthuses Newton consultant and gardener Vanessa McClinchy. “Between composting, re-purposing, and recycling, we’re down to the equivalent of one-third of a kitchen trash bag each week and never use yard waste bags, as we compost all of our fallen leaves through the winter. An added bonus has been the legions of happy red worms that keep our composters humming so efficiently that I now donate my extra barrels of ‘black gold’ to my friends.”

But can a resolution to start composting really begin in January? Isn’t it too cold? While heat from the external environment helps speed the composting process, it isn’t absolutely necessary.

“Heat and worms (mutually exclusive of course) are over-rated in my opinion,” says Brandeis ecologist and Green Decade board member Eric Olson. “The real players are bacteria, fungi, and time.” Indeed, any organic material you heap untended will, over time, become compost. If you want compost for the next growing season, however, you have to put in a little more effort. You can make a short term bin by drilling multiple holes in an old plastic garbage can or purchase a compost bin from the City of Newton. The City offers two easy-to-assemble designs, both of which can be easily assembled and put into use even in the dead of winter. Visit www.newtonma.gov/gov/dpw/recycling/composting/bin.asp for more info. Any decay will be delayed by cold or freezing but will quickly resume once Spring arrives.

Experienced Newton composters are divided over whether to make or to buy compost bins. Naomi Rush Olson, a West Newton social worker and environmentalist, says she loves the two side-by-side, open-topped, wood bins husband Eric built. “My husband built them by digging cedar posts in at the corners and hammering ubiquitous and affordable boards from old pallets to the sides,” she explains. “I like our big open bins because you can usually tuck the food waste under some dry leaves or grass clippings and make them less obvious to neighbors.” The front, or façade, of the bins

is built a bit lower so that it’s easy to get at the compost in process with a pitchfork (Rush Olson favors a lightweight pitchfork with a weather-resistant handle), which “is a fun thing to do when the weather is nice, and doesn’t need to be done in winter,” she continues. “We add waste to one side until we can’t anymore and then switch sides, perhaps two or three times a year, allowing the “full” side to ripen and settle.”

“We used the Newton black plastic composters for years and very successfully,” says Newtonville pianist Stephanie Rogers, “but we did outgrow them, so my husband built a large triple-bin system out of wood. We can fit anything in there!” The triple binning allows for piles in different stages of “ripeness,” or decomposition, so one is always ready for use.



“I love composting – leaves, grass clippings, kitchen waste – but I hated my composter,” explains digital journalist and Newton Girls Soccer board member Ralph Ranalli. “It’s one of those converted plastic barrels that held olives or whatever. For years and years I coveted one of those ComposTumblers with the fancy crank handle: I would read the Mantis catalogue like some guys read car magazines.” Ranalli was at an estate sale last spring when he spied a ComposTumbler in the woman’s garden. “On a whim I asked whether it was for sale and it was. I got it for about 1/10 the price of a new one. Stunk up my car on the way home, but you should have seen the smile on my face.”



Self-proclaimed “devoted composter” Matt Yospin extols the virtues of his latching rotary composter, which is called into service year ‘round. “All our food scraps, lawn clippings, and leaves (I mow them to mulch every fall, mix them with green stuff all year)” find their way into Yospin’s composter. When it comes time to plant his extensive vegetable garden in the spring, Yospin need only give his composter one final twirl, and he’s in business.

The other thing a new composter will need is a bucket or other container to hold compost fixings in between trips to the pile. “I like having something convenient and attractive in the kitchen to toss our non-greasy, non-meat food waste into,” explains Rush Olson. “What had worked best for us is a stainless pail with a handle and a nice simple lid. It fits on our counter without taking up too much space; it’s easy to

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE CITY OF NEWTON WEBSITE - BUY A COMPOST BIN

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carry in and outside, easy to rinse out, and the lid means you can close it if need be, which is nice if you have had to get rid of something that spoiled in the fridge.”

Eric Olson says that for the home composter, the addition of lots of fall leaf rakings is key, which significantly dilutes “green” material with “brown”. By “green” Olson means “nutrient-rich, potentially very fresh, active material that, piled up on its own, would become a soggy and potentially quite smelly mess versus the relatively inert carbon rich material like fallen leaves or hay or shredded paper.” In farm settings, he continues, “green” would include “fresh livestock poops of any kind, like chicken litter, and also cow or horse manures, especially when mixed with urine and, thus, quite wet.” In a suburban setting, though, “green” means mostly kitchen scraps – but not always.

“We started composting when we bought our first house, 15 years ago,” remembers Rogers. “Finally having a yard was the big inspiration but also a wonderful book I happened upon – *Secrets to Great Soil*, one of the Storey Gardening series – totally converted me to the cause.” For years, Rogers kept rabbits, “and their bedding and droppings were like rocket fuel for the garden!” Vegetable gardeners might want to avoid using animal waste, however. Rogers’ spectacular garden contains only flowers and shrubs – as some home compost piles don’t grow hot enough to destroy any animal pathogens.

“Really, composting need not be tricky,” says Olson reassuringly. The “turning and recipes can accelerate things, and by having open bins, it’s easier to add leaves as needed

and monitor for yucky moments when there may be some bad odors being generated. The solution to slimy looking material and odors is always the same: add more leaves (brown) to fluff the mess up and dilute the high nutrient stuff that is prone to produce slime and odors. Keeping some plastic bags or even paper lawn bags of leaves next to the bin is a good practice, you have a handy source of brown as needed.”

Former Alderman Greer Tan Swiston is happy to tick off the free benefits composting can provide for all Newton citizens. “It greatly reduces my trash and consumes the coffee grinds from the office, makes use of the trash barrels that became obsolete with the new city barrels and produces some fairly nutrient rich soil every year.” Swiston, who composts, “mostly because my mom always did,” also finds that her yard is quieter with no leaf blowing. Her family of four produces less trash, only half filling their trash barrel every other week, and, in the fall, “I get a bit of exercise each week... going out to clear out driveway and walkway,” of leaves to add to the compost mix.

And then there is the matter of a little neighborly, if not one-upmanship, then persuasion by example. “The difference between our healthy plants – and the number of bees that frequent them – has come to the notice of our neighbor, who will neither compost nor embrace organic seed and growing habits,” says Vanessa McClinchy. “We hope to convince him some day!” ■

🌿 Margaret Doris

Compostable Items

- Fresh grass clippings
- Shredded leaves
- Kitchen trimmings and peels from vegetables and fruits
- Sawdust (NOT pressure treated)
- Garden discards such as dead flowers and plants
- Vegetable and fruit peelings• Manure (from horses, cows, chickens, rabbits, guinea pigs, hogs or sheep. Do not compost any wastes from dogs or cats.)
- Black and white sections of newspapers (shredded or torn up)
- Torn cardboard or cereal boxes
- Rotted fruits and vegetables
- Pine needles
- Coffee grounds (with or without filters)
- Tea leaves
- Nut shells
- Seafood shells and fish bones
- Cooked rice or pasta
- Egg shells
- Paper napkins and paper towels
- Melon rinds (cut small if possible)
- Dryer lint
- Stale bread
- Expired canned fruit and vegetables
- Soggy breakfast cereal