



# Smart Gardening Information Sheet

## BACKYARD COMPOSTING QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

*If a healthy soil is full of death, it is also full of life: worms, fungi, microorganisms of all kinds. Given only the health of the soil, nothing that dies is dead for very long.*

*Wendell Berry, 1977  
 The Unsettling of America*



PROBLEM	CAUSE	SOLUTION
Odors	Too wet	Too much water is not generally a problem, but it may cause the center of the pile to compact and become anaerobic, resulting in an ammonia or rotten egg odor (an alcohol odor is also possible). Add fresh dry material and turn to mix thoroughly.
	Too much green material	An ammonia, rotten egg or alcohol odor is a clear indication that your bin or pile has become anaerobic (all the oxygen has been used up.) The smell is caused by the rapid conversion of nitrogen compounds in the green waste into ammonia or the fermentation of simple sugars into alcohol (in the case of composting, almost always methyl alcohol, which is poisonous and combustible). Add more brown, dry material and turn to mix the compost materials thoroughly. If you need a ready source of brown material, you can easily shred newspaper or junk mail (be careful to remove any plastic) and use it.
	Insufficient air	This is virtually always the problem. The solution is simple, just turn the pile or bin and mix the compost materials thoroughly.
	Material is too compact	Loosen the compost by mixing or turning.
The center of the pile is dry	Not enough water	Moisten materials while turning the pile
The compost is damp & warm in the middle, but the outside is dry.	The pile is too small	Collect more compostable material (both green and brown) and mix the new materials thoroughly with the existing compost in your bin or pile. Remember, you need about 1 cubic yard (a pile 3' x 3' x 3') to get the proper results.
The heap is damp and sweet smelling but still will not heat up properly.	Lack of nitrogen	Mix in a nitrogen source like fresh grass clippings, trimming waste from kitchen fruits and vegetables, fresh manure, or ammonium sulfate. If you don't have enough fresh green materials, try talking to the produce manager at your local grocery store and see if they will give you "trimming waste" from their produce.

<b>PROBLEM</b>	<b>CAUSE</b>	<b>SOLUTION</b>
<b>Rodents or other vermin in the compost</b>	<b>Meat or other putrescible materials were added to the pile or bin</b>	Most rodents and vermin are attracted by rotting meat or other putrescible foods and/or warmth of the compost bin or pile. Be careful not to add meat, oils, fats or dairy products, and cover each addition of food scraps from the kitchen with a layer of finished compost. Place the bin on a layer of fine wire mesh to keep pests from burrowing into the bin and cover all holes with wire as well. Set non-lethal, humane traps around the bin or pile.
<b>There are flies in the compost</b>	<b>Meat or other putrescible materials were added to the pile or bin</b>	Most of the flies in and around a compost heap are fruit flies, which are generally harmless. If you have house flies in and around your bin or pile, then they are being attracted by rotting meat, oils or dairy foods. Cover organic waste with a thin layer of soil, grass or leaves. Avoid adding meat, dairy products or other putrescible foods.
<b>Spiders in and around the compost bin or pile</b>	<b>Attracted to moist, dark places with easy sources of prey</b>	Spiders are attracted by ready sources of food such as invertebrates (bugs). Always check for spiders in and around your compost bin or pile before sticking your hand in. Most spiders are harmless, although there are several poisonous species in Southern California such as the Black Widow and the Brown Recluse, so be careful. Always wear gloves when working with your compost. Cover each addition of food with a layer of soil to discourage flies and remove or kill (if poisonous) any spiders you may find.
<b>It's taking a lot longer to make finished compost than I thought it would.</b>	<b>Too dry</b>	Add water
	<b>Not right mix of greens and browns</b>	Generally, if it's taking a long time (more than 3 to 4 months) to get finished compost, then you probably have too much brown stuff and need to add more green material. Again, if you don't have enough fresh green materials, try talking to the produce manager at your local grocery store and see if they will give you "trimming waste" from their produce.
	<b>Not enough air</b>	Either turn more frequently and/or add 1-2 lbs. of compost worms. If you have a big bin or pile, you can also assist the aeration process by placing a length of 4" diameter slotted PVC pipe into the center of the pile or bin.