

just the facts



Composting



4330 Kingsway,
Burnaby, B.C.
V5H 4G8

Demand Side Management

Telephone:
(604) 432-6375
Fax:
(604) 436-6811
Website:
www.gvrd.bc.ca

WHAT IS IT?

Composting is a natural process of decay that results in a nutrient-rich soil conditioner called compost. Many living organisms, such as bacteria, fungi, worms and beetles help break down organic material. Organic material includes anything that is or was living. Examples are food wastes such as vegetable peelings and tea bags, yard wastes such as leaves, grass and plant trimmings; and small cut-up branches and twigs.

WHERE CAN YOU COMPOST?

You can compost in your backyard. Build your own compost bin or purchase a bin. Some municipalities offer rodent resistant bins to residents for a reasonable price. Most municipalities also offer curbside collection and drop off depots for yard and garden trimmings. Kitchen waste is not accepted.

QUICK FACTS

126,061 compost bins were distributed by the GVRD member municipalities between 1991-2001.

62% of homeowners compost

45% of all household waste in 2001 was organic, and about half of it could have been composted in people's backyards.

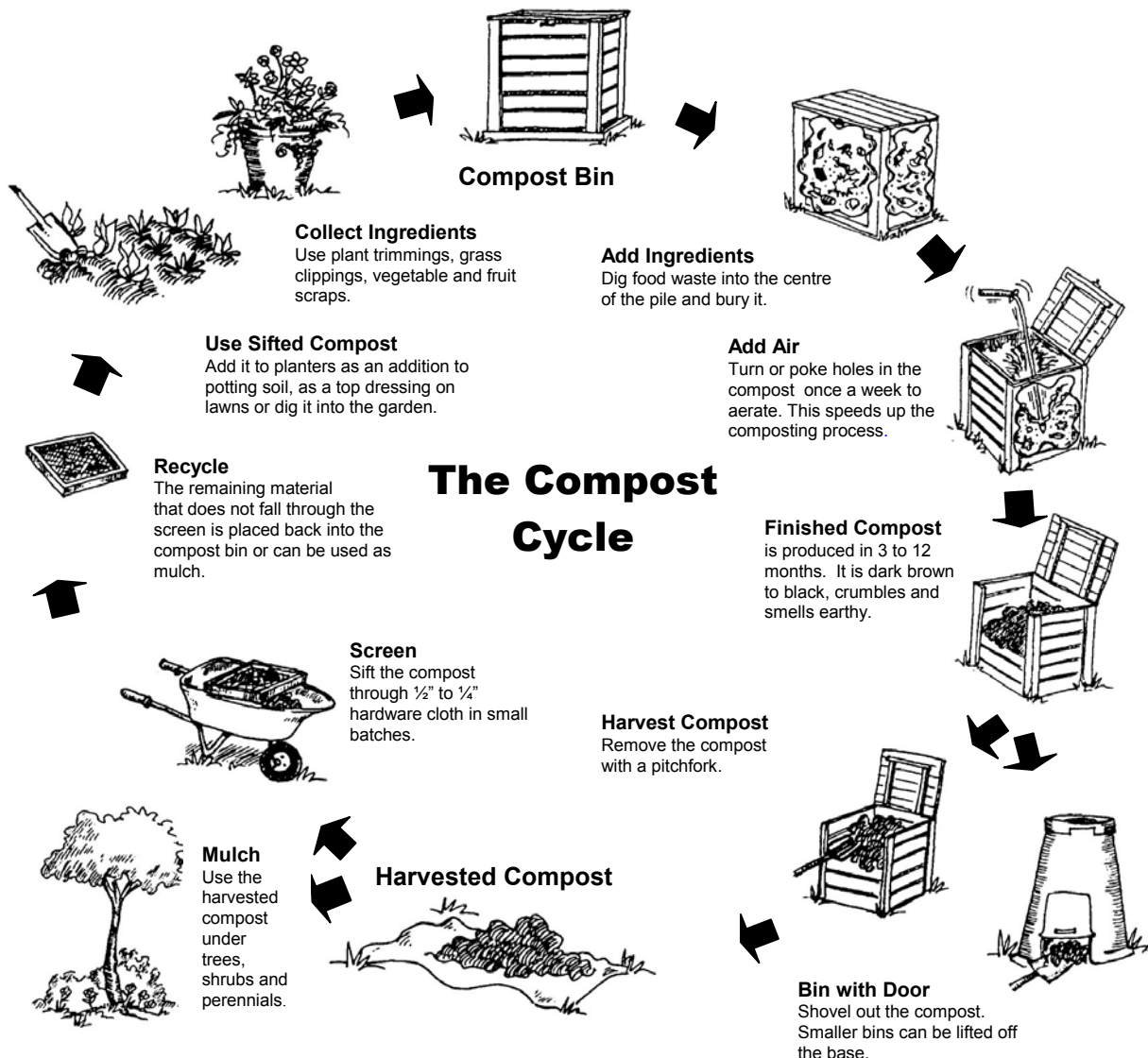
22 minutes a week, or just over 3 minutes a day, are spent in composting activities on average.

65°C can be reached in a compost bin under the correct conditions.

47% of residents regularly use mulch and compost in their garden.

One application of compost could have a positive effect on plant growth for up to 8 years.

3 major types of bacteria work in a compost bin, each active at a different temperature range. Psychrophiles at 0-13°C, mesophiles at 15-40°C and thermophiles at 45-70°C.



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WHAT MATERIALS CAN BE COMPOSTED?

Green Material (Nitrogen-rich)

- ◆ vegetables and fruits
- ◆ coffee grounds
- ◆ tea leaves/bags
- ◆ fresh grass clippings
- ◆ green plant trimmings

Brown Material (Carbon-rich)

- ◆ straw
- ◆ sawdust, wood shavings
- ◆ dry leaves
- ◆ shredded newspaper

WHAT MATERIALS CANNOT BE COMPOSTED?

- ◆ anything that would attract pests – meat, bones, greasy foods and oils
- ◆ grain products or cooked food scraps
- ◆ grass clippings treated with pesticides
- ◆ dog or cat feces
- ◆ BBQ ashes or coal

HOW LONG DOES THE COMPOSTING PROCESS TAKE?

3 – 12 months depending on a number of factors. The factors include:

- ◆ Temperature
- ◆ material size – surface area
- ◆ carbon-to-nitrogen ratio
- ◆ degree of turning/mixing involved
- ◆ moisture
- ◆ oxygen

The more actively these are managed, the faster the process.

HOW DO YOU GET GREAT COMPOSTING RESULTS?

- ◆ chop up large material - thumb size is best
- ◆ add equal amounts of carbon-rich and nitrogen-rich materials
- ◆ add grass clippings in thin layers (5 cm thick)
- ◆ keep composting material wet but not too wet. It should feel like a wrung-out sponge
- ◆ Add air (aerate) once a week by turning or poking holes in decomposing material

WHEN SHOULD COMPOST BE HARVESTED?

Compost can be harvested and applied to gardens throughout the year. However, early spring is the best time to use it because the nutrients are available to the plants over a longer period of time. If compost is applied in the winter, the rain can wash the nutrients away.

WHERE CAN COMPOST BE USED?

- ◆ **lawn** – aerate and rake 5 cm of compost over the surface
- ◆ **shrubs, plants, around perennials and trees** – top dress
- ◆ **garden** – dig compost into any new created garden bed
- ◆ **containers** – as part of a potting soil mix

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF COMPOST?

- ◆ It creates spaces for air and water, allowing for good root penetration. The result is healthy plants.
- ◆ It holds moisture in the soil.
- ◆ Compost releases nutrients slowly. It provides important macronutrients (nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium) and micronutrients (calcium, magnesium and boron).
- ◆ It buffers the soil and makes soil nutrients available over a wider range of acidities, enabling a greater variety of plants to grow.
- ◆ It can control some soil-borne diseases and prevent soil erosion.

TIPS.....

- ◆ **BUILD YOUR BIN** with reused materials.
- ◆ **SAVE YOUR LEAVES** for summer composting.
- ◆ **MOW OVER LEAVES** or use a weed trimmer in a garbage can to chop them.
- ◆ **ADD FOOD WASTE JUST AFTER MIXING**
- ◆ **MULCH** – Place a 5 cm layer of grass clippings, leaves or chipped yard waste on the ground to insulate the soil from heat and cold. As the materials decompose they will slowly release nutrients to the soil.
- ◆ **TOP-DRESS** - Add compost around the bottom of plants without disturbing the root system. Leave the plant stem free for air to circulate.
- ◆ **MAKE POTTING SOIL MIX** - for containers or baskets.
Generic recipe: equal parts perlite, soil and sifted compost.
- ◆ **NOURISH PLANTS WITH COMPOST TEA** – Fill an old tea towel with compost and knot the towel. Soak the bag overnight in a garbage can of water. Water your plants with the resulting nutrient-rich compost tea.
- ◆ **COLLECT FOOD SCRAPS IN THE FREEZER** – No smell. No flies.

Sources

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Composting Council of Canada, 1996, *25 Questions and Answers About Composting*

Greater Vancouver Regional District, 2000 *Compost Resource Manual*

Regional Recycling Recoveries – 2000.

COMPOSTING QUESTIONS?

Call the Composting Hotline at 604-736-2250

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