

Preventing Odours in your Composter

Do composters smell? The reality is that a properly maintained compost pile does not give off unpleasant odours. Still, this question is on the minds of many people who start to compost – and some households are hesitant to start at all for fear of this problem. This fact sheet sets out a few simple steps you can take to avoid odours when you compost.

The Best Prevention Tips

■ BURY FRESH ADDITIONS

Bury or cover the fresh food wastes you add to the pile. You can use a pitchfork or a trowel to dig them in, or just lift a corner of the pile and cover them over. Alternatively, a layer of leaves or soil on top of fresh food scraps will help deaden any odours.

■ ADD THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS

Never add meat, bones, dairy products, fats or oils to your composter. These tend to cause odours as they decompose. They can also attract animals. See our fact sheet “What to Compost” for more information.

■ KEEP THE MIX RIGHT

Try to add a mixture of “greens” and “browns” to your pile. Greens include fresh grass clippings and kitchen scraps. Browns are materials such as dry leaves and straw. Keeping a good balance of these materials will make your pile work more efficiently, reducing the chance of unpleasant odours.

■ LET THE AIR IN

Make sure there is enough air in the pile. Air can be added by turning the pile with a garden pitchfork. Poking holes into the compost with a rake or broom handle will also help air flow. Custom-made compost aerators are also available locally. Call Peterborough Green-Up for details.

■ KEEP THE PILE MOIST, NOT WET

Keep the pile about as damp as a wrung-out sponge. To maintain this moisture level you may need to add a bit of water to your bin, or let it dry out for a few days occasionally.

■ BREAK UP LARGE PIECES

Do not add large, unchopped items to the pile. Large items may smell as they decompose. The smaller you chop the materials you add to your bin the faster the decomposer organisms can break them down.



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What Odours Mean

■ AMMONIA

An ammonia smell means that too much green material has been added to the pile over a short period of time. Mix in some “brown” material such as leaves or straw to produce a healthy balance.

A common culprit is grass clippings. If you are adding a lot of grass clippings to your bin, try grass-cycling instead. Grass-cycling is the process of reclaiming the valuable nutrients in these clippings by leaving them on your lawn. It saves time, reduces waste and helps your grass build a deeper, healthier root system that is more resistant to disease, drought and insects.

If for some reason you need to compost a lot of grass clippings, mix them with “brown” materials as you add them, or let them dry in the sun before adding them to the compost bin.

■ ROTTEN EGGS

Compost piles that are too wet or too compacted may not have enough air in them to work properly and can begin to give off a rotten egg smell. If your pile is too wet, add some dry materials such as leaves to absorb some of the moisture. Mix the pile well. A thin layer of soil on top will help deaden odours. Soil also has the benefit of adding decomposer organisms to the pile.

Any Questions?

The tips given in this fact sheet will help you avoid odours. They will also help keep pests away and make your composter work more efficiently.

If you have any more questions, please call Peterborough Green-Up, the Peterborough City Waste Management Department or County of Peterborough Environmental Services at the numbers listed below.

FACT SHEETS IN THIS SERIES

- Composting: The Basics
- Preventing Odours in your Composter
- Composting Solutions / What to Compost
- Composting through the Seasons
- Pest-proofing your Compost Bin
- Using Compost in your Yard
- Vermicomposting



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