



## The Glamorous World of Composting



*"As a mom I want to provide the very best I can for my children. Gardening not only allows us to grow beautiful vegetables, but gave us a fun, simple activity we have built so many treasured memories around. We're so lucky that Los Angeles gives us a fabulous climate for year-round gardening fun."*

- Vanna White

In gardening circles, compost is often referred to as "black gold." And while it may not be selling for \$1400 an ounce, its value is priceless to our planet and to us. In a forest, composting occurs naturally. There is no waste. As plants die, shed leaves or get eaten by animals, that "waste" decomposes into healthy soil on the forest floor.

Although composting dates back to the early Roman Empire, today composting is a "new" must-have for the green home. From high-rises in Dubai with bokashi systems, to \$300 kitchen composters from Williams-Sonoma, composting is the thing to do. Free or fancy, whatever your style, there's a choice for you.

### 1. How do I get started?

All you need is a pitchfork and either a simple bin or a place for a pile and essentially composting is as easy and as cheap as anything can be. You'll want to maintain a 50/50 mix of green or nitrogen-rich materials (food scraps) with brown or carbon-rich materials, (dry leaves and twigs). Allow the materials to heat up and "cook" to encourage decomposition to create humus, or mature compost. Beneficial microorganisms break down dead plant matter into essential elements – the ones that plants need to thrive.

brown pieces. Mix them and add water every 7-10 days. Your compost is ready to use in about 1-3 months. It will look, feel and smell like fresh earth.

### 3. Do I need a special bin or tumbler?

You don't need any special bin or tumbler. However, creating compost requires air. Turning your pile mixes and aerates it, which will speed the process along. With a bin you'll use a pitchfork to turn the pile. A tumbler allows you to mix it up using a hand-crank, or some other clever way. Bin, tumbler, fancy or hand-made—it's simply a matter of preference.

### 2. Active or passive?

To heat up properly, compost piles should be at least one cubic yard in size. You can have a smaller pile, but you'll be doing "passive" or cold composting. This method still produces compost; it just takes longer and doesn't get "hot" so it doesn't kill any weed seeds. For an "active" composting process, keep a balance of 1"-sized green and

### 4. Aren't compost bins stinky and hard to maintain?

No. A well-maintained compost bin or pile heats up quickly and doesn't smell. Maintenance is as easy as occasionally turning it and adding a bit of water so that the compost stays damp.

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TreePeople's Sustainable Solutions Program is dedicated to landscape transformation - turning yards into functional landscapes that are beautiful and sustainable. Our monthly guides and checklists detail an easy, step-by-step process, helping us all create a healthy urban forest where water is valued, air is clean, soil is healthy and trees are thriving.

**Next Month: Garden Tours**

## Linda's List

Linda Eremita, TreePeople's Senior ISA Certified Arborist, has the following suggestions for your March gardening fun:

### Climate Appropriate Plant of the Month

Yankee Point ceanothus (*Ceanothus griseus horizontalis* 'Yankee Point')

Yankee Point is one of the most popular low-growing ceanothus and is widely available. This evergreen grows 2' to 3' high and can spread 8' to 15', making it a great ground-cover. Blue flowers appear March to May. It performs well near the coast and in coastal valleys. Inland, it needs a bit of water and can take some shade. It is tolerant of garden water and is very durable. You'll attract butterflies and beneficial insects with this plant.

### Upcoming Workshops

April 16, 2011 - Community Greening Workshop • June 4, 2011 - TreePeople's Green City Fair!



Photo by Monica Schrock

## Resources

- LA County Depart. of Public Works  
[www.smartgardening.com](http://www.smartgardening.com)  
Compost bins \$40; worm bins \$65.
- LA City Bureau of Sanitation  
[www.ci.la.ca.us/san/solid\\_resources/recycling/composting/](http://www.ci.la.ca.us/san/solid_resources/recycling/composting/)  
Compost bins \$20; worm bins \$5.

## Out-of-the-Box Apartment Footprint

Apartment dwellers can use many of the composting techniques listed in the main article. Worm bins, bokashi and automatic kitchen composters are all good choices. But if have nowhere to use all that lovely finished compost... no worries. To offset your waste footprint consider setting up a recycling program in your building.

It's easy. L.A. city residents in multi-family buildings of 5 or more units can call (213) 473-4142 or visit [www.LArecycles.org](http://www.LArecycles.org).

Not an L.A. city resident? If you live in one of the other cities in Los Angeles County, check with your city's public works or sanitation department. The County does not have a formal program for multi-family dwellings in unincorporated areas. Work with your apartment manager or owner and the hauler to find a recycling solution.

### 5. What about worm bins?

Worm bins can be used almost anywhere. They produce worm castings, a rich compost that can be used to amend soil or fertilize your veggie garden. Also created is worm tea, a liquid fertilizer that collects in the bottom-most bin. Dilute it with water in at least a 1:5 ratio. Experts disagree about using worm tea on veggie gardens because of possible bacteria. Err on the side of caution and use it on non-edibles. Use Red-worms or Red Wigglers and keep the bin where the temperatures will be between 45 and 75 degrees.

### 6. Is bokashi really composting?

Yes. Bokashi is a type of fermenting or pickling of waste. The systems require a starter kit, but once they get

going they are great for apartments. Another advantage of bokashi is that they can handle both pet waste and meat and dairy food wastes.

### 7. Can I put food scraps in the trash?

Yes. According to the Environmental Protection Agency roughly 25% of the garbage in the U.S. is made up of yard trimmings and food scraps. That's over 60 million tons each year. Additionally, landfills produce methane, a potent greenhouse gas which contributes to climate change, and leachate (basically, trash juice) which can mix with stormwater runoff and pollute our waterways.

Through composting, each of us has the power to decrease our impact on the earth and turn green waste into gold!

## Things to Compost

### Green Material

- Grass clippings
- Garden trimmings/leaves
- Fruit and vegetable scraps
- Coffee grounds and filters
- Tea leaves and bags
- Stale bread
- Egg shells

### Brown Material

- Shredded paper
- Wood chips and sawdust
- Straw and hay
- Dry grass and leaves
- Pine and fir needles
- Nut shells
- Woody stalks

### Worm Bin Material

- Fruit scraps
- Vegetable scraps
- Egg shells
- Coffee grounds and filters
- Tea leaves and bags
- Shredded paper for bedding

## Member Benefit

Malibu Compost creates biodynamic compost products in its mission to heal our soil, our planet and ourselves. Email [specials@malibucompost.com](mailto:specials@malibucompost.com) or call 1-800-BUCOMPOST. If you're a member, mention TreePeople for a 40% discount on Bu's Brew Biodynamic Compost Tea Bags!

To become a member go to [www.treepeople.org](http://www.treepeople.org).