

Troubleshooting your Compost Pile

Symptoms	Possible Causes	Possible Solutions
Damp and warm only in middle of pile	Pile too small, built too gradually, or cold weather	Form pile at least 3 feet high and wide, Cover with tarp. Put in covered bin. Or allow to compost “cold”
Pile not heating up at all	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not enough nitrogen 2. Not enough oxygen 3. Not moist enough 4. Pile too small, build too gradually, or cold weather 5. Compost finished 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mix in fresh grass clippings, manure, or food scraps. 2. Turn or fluff the pile, especially where it is smelly or matted. 3. Turn the pile, wetting as you turn to consistency of damp sponge. 4. Form pile as least 3 feet high and wide. Cover with tarp. Put in covered bin. Or allow to compost “cold and slow”. 5. If dark and crumbly, smells earthy (not moldy or foul) – use it!
Matted, non decomposed leaves or grass clippings	Compaction, poor aeration, or lack of moisture	Avoid thick layers or leaves, grass, or paper. Break up layers with garden fork, then wet and re-mix the pile. Shred materials.
Odor like rancid butter, vinegar, or rotten eggs	Not enough oxygen, too wet or compacted	Turn pile, fluffing materials to aerate them. Add coarse dry materials like leaves as needed to soak up excess moisture. If odor is intense, possibly cover with layer of newspapers and/or coarse dry materials and allow pile to mellow before turning.
Odor like ammonia	Not enough carbon	Add “brown” materials and aerate. If odor is intense, possibly cover and allow pile to mellow before turning.
Attracting rats, raccoons, dogs, flies, or other pests	Inappropriate materials (meat, oil, bones, etc.) or food too close to surface	Dispose of meat and oil. Use a rodent-resistant bin. Bury kitchen scraps 8 to 12 inches deep in the pile.
Attracting various insects, centipedes, slugs, etc.	Normal composting	If garden pests are identified in pile, use traps or barriers between pile and garden.
Infested with fire ants	Too dry, not hot enough, or food too close to surface	Drench ant mounds with compost tea sweetened with feed-grade molasses. Broadcast low-toxicity fire ant bait for major infestations. Carefully rebuild pile to proper conditions, wetting thoroughly.

