



## You Cannot Compost Everything

### Materials that should *not* be put in compost pile

- Bones
- Cat manure
- Cheese
- Chicken
- Dog manure
- Fat
- Fish scraps
- Meat
- Milk
- Noxious weeds
- Oils

While people in other parts of the United States are exulting that spring might actually arrive after a fierce winter, those of us who live in the desert southwest are planning our summer gardens. One important garden element, in any climate or season, is compost.

Composting is an effective way to get rid of kitchen and garden waste without sending it to the landfill, and it creates a valuable soil amendment. Whether produced in a modest pile or a decorative tumbler, compost happens when biological samples are moistened and combined. We need not really do anything; nature causes things to break down, eventually.

Controlling the conditions for producing compost expedites the process. In fact, in some situations, materials can change from apple cores and tea bags to beautiful black-brown compost in eight weeks, or sometimes less.

There are many guides to composting, but many of them are focused on a cooler, moister climate. Fortunately, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension has several publications aimed at inhabitants of the Mojave and Great Basin Deserts. These are readily available on the web.

Many publications will mention what not to put into a compost pile, bin, or tumbler. Generally these include dairy products, meat or fish, cat and dog manure. Will these items not break down? They must, somehow!

Indeed they do, but they should not be included in compost for several reasons.

Dairy products, such as milk, cheese, butter, etc. will degrade, but they pose two problems for the intrepid composter. Have you ever smelled sour milk or rancid butter? Would you really want that odor next to your home or garden? These products are also attractive to vermin, which we try to avoid.

Oils, margarine, salad dressing and anything greasy are on the “not to compost” list. Again, these will ultimately break down, but not before posing problems in the composter. Oils

can become rancid and smell, but an even bigger concern is that these items can form small airless pockets of material. Most of the useful composting bacteria and all of the fungi require air, specifically oxygen, in order to survive. In these airless pockets, the only creatures that survive are anaerobes, bacteria that do not breathe air, but do create foul odors. These bacteria compost much more slowly.

Diseased plants and plant parts infested with insect pests should not be included. Temperatures may reach 160° F in a compost bin or tumbler, but that does not mean every cubic inch will get that hot. Unless one can be certain it will become hot enough to kill all disease organisms and insect pests, it is best to exclude these as well.

Dog and cat manure should not go in because it will attract other dogs and cats, and may not be a healthy addition to compost in a vegetable or children's garden.

Finally, avoid adding Bermuda grass or flowering weeds to the compost. Temperatures may not be high enough throughout the system to kill all of these potential problems.

Composting is simple, but paying attention to the ingredients prevents complications later.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. Contact [ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu](mailto:ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu) or 702-257-5581.