Okay, you’ve now decided to make your own compost. Getting an efficient composter is a good start. Here’s a brief how-to.
A composter all your own

Composting is not only good for the environment—it also provides excellent fertilizers for vegetable plots, lawns, garden beds and flower boxes. Before buying a composter, however, establish your needs and goals. How much available space do you have at home? How much kitchen and/or yard waste is there for composting? Are there city bylaws regarding the use and size of composters? Also, several municipalities encourage home composting by making composters available at low cost or by offering subsidies and grants. Be sure to look into this.

On-ground bin-composter
Open-bottomed, this style is installed directly on the ground so that insects and worms can get in and help speed up decomposition. This also allows the liquid compost “tea”—called leachate—to seep freely into the soil.

The plastic—preferably recycled—bin requires little maintenance and absorbs heat effectively. It’s lighter than a wooden unit, easier to transport, rot-resistant and more durable. If you opt for plastic, get the UV-treated variety for extra durability. A wooden bin, on the other hand, is eco-friendlier since that resource is renewable. And while wood decomposes over time, it too can be composted. Choose rot-resistant (cedar or larch, for example) or heat-treated wood.

The bin’s walls must have ventilation holes so oxygen can circulate freely—an essential condition to allow organic matter to break down. The more openings there are, the better. Shape is not really an issue—just bear in mind that a cone-shaped bin makes turning compost material easier because it won’t clog up in the corners, while a square or rectangular shape holds more. Compost bins must have a lift-gate (or trap door) at the base that’s wide enough to retrieve the finished compost. The opening on top must also be large enough for easy turning of the compost. Several models feature a lid with two openings: the smaller one for dropping in the food scraps, the larger for turning the pile. Some wooden units come with stackable modules which can be removed as needed to facilitate turning. Take time to select the model that best suits your needs, avoiding those that are deeper than they are wide or you’ll need to be an acrobat to turn over the materials. Finally, make sure your chosen model has a hermetic lid to shield the compost pile from rain and snow and to keep small critters out.

Pros
The simplest and most economical way of composting a large volume of organic matter.

Cons
Compost pile must be turned often with a pitchfork, which can be physically taxing; composting process takes 6 to 12 months; adding fresh materials in wintertime is possible, although the composting process slows down or even stops completely due to cold weather; disagreeable odours if the process is improperly managed.
Spinning- or tumbler-style composter

Made of plastic (ideally recycled and UV-treated), this type comes equipped with a mechanism—mounted on rollers or an axle—complete with a handle for spinning. The barrel is raised to facilitate the operation. Compost tumblers must include air holes—usually adjustable—and a large opening for easy retrieval. Several models come with two chambers: one for composting, the other for holding the finished compost. The base includes a compost-tea tray.

Pros
Easy turning; short composting process (four to six weeks); suitable for apartment dwellers (can be installed on a balcony or paved surface).

Cons
Limited capacity (usually smaller than the on-ground style); barrel is harder to spin when full so must be emptied often; materials tend to bind together, which can damage the spinning mechanism; limited aeration—spinning must be done at least three times weekly; lack of decomposing organisms can affect the composting process; compost-tea tray must be emptied regularly to prevent accumulation; composter should not be turned in wintertime, although fresh materials can be added; more expensive than on-ground style.

Vermicomposter

Vermicomposting is a process using red worms that consume and digest large amounts of organic waste, quickly converting it into nutrient-rich fertilizer. This type of composting is an indoor activity, however, because red worms can’t tolerate cold weather. A vermicomposter is simply a plastic bin with a hermetic lid and a perforated bottom for easy drainage. It must include air holes on the lid and sides, as well as a tray at the bottom to collect the compost tea.

Pros
Easy to transport and needs little space; no turning—worms do the job by burrowing and churning the raw materials; no bad odours since the worms eat decomposed organic waste; nutrient-rich, homogenous compost, perfect for indoor plants; ideal for apartment-dwellers without a yard or a balcony and who aren’t squeamish about worms.

Cons
Limited capacity (sometimes more than one bin is required); worms must be fed regularly and adequately (but not too much); inadequate feeding may produce fruit flies and kill the worms; compost-tea tray must be emptied and rinsed often.

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