

Is My Compost Ready?

As a gardener in northern BC (or anywhere for that matter); whether you are growing food, investing in the beauty of flowers and plants outdoors or indoors, composting will be one of the best tools in your arsenal to increase yields, productivity and health in your garden. Composting requires investing time and patience, and after all of that effort, knowing when your compost has cured (ready for garden use) or not is going to be at the forefront of its effectiveness in your garden.

The recommended time for compost to cure can range from 1-4 months depending on the method used. Cold composting will take longer than hot composting as bacterial interactions are sped up when using the hot composting method. The best way to know if your compost is ready is to use your senses and this is where the fun starts!

Step 1: Checking for internal temperature. This can be achieved by simply using a compost thermometer; or you can use a long spade shovel dug into the centre of the pile. Using the spade to separate the soil, reach into the pile and get a sense of whether it is still warm/hot. If there is no difference in the centre temperature to the atmospheric temperature, this indicates that your compost is ready. If it is still warm, it is recommended to return the compost to where it was and let it cure a little longer. The reason for the temperature check is to ensure that all of the bacteria breaking the organic matter down, have completed their function and thus allows for fungus to start growing instead. Allowing time for fungus to grow in your compost produces better nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium and other micronutrient results and ultimately better symbiosis (nutrient assimilation) to your plants.

Step 2: Completing the final turn. Once the temperature has reached atmospheric temperature it is time to turn your compost for its final turn. Using a shovel, turn the compost over from the very centre. Firstly, you need to decide if the colour is correct. Your compost should be a deep and dark brown/black colour very similar to black earth. Secondly, use your hands to feel the compost. It should be airy, crumbly, damp, and cool to the touch. It should break easily between your fingers. Lastly, smell your compost. It should smell like fresh soil, not mouldy and not like ammonia.

If your compost does not meet any one of these 3 criteria, then something may have gone wrong warranting further investigation as to the cause. Some common issues may include: mold, creature interference, or improper layering or ratio of green and brown organic matter. These characteristics are also very important when purchasing compost, you want to ensure that temperature, texture, and scent are all met.

Once you master the art of composting you can rest assured that you will have a beautiful, bountiful, and blossoming garden for years to come.

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