

# Why Your Compost Doesn't Get **HOT** And how to fix it!

**10 Simple  
Solutions**

**Get Finished  
Compost in 6  
Weeks!**



By Marion Owen  
Master Organic Gardener  
Kodiak, Alaska

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# Why Your Compost Doesn't Get **HOT** *...and 10 Ways to Fix It!*

By Marion Owen (Master Organic Gardener in Kodiak, Alaska)

**G**ardeners tell me there's nothing more frustrating than to invest tons of time and energy into making compost, only to have it turn into a soggy, smelly mess. Or dry out altogether so it just sits there.

Stuff happens. That's why I created this checklist: To help you **assess your compost** and then **apply solutions** so you can get your compost pile back on its feet.

One important thing to keep in mind, though: Temperatures inside the pile need to remain between 90 and 160° F. (32-71° C). That is, if you want finished compost in a matter of weeks — not years.



Without enough heat to keep things going, you may end up with a wet, stinky mess or compost that dries out too quickly. Sigh... Your compost stops working. Those poor microbes! Those poor plants!

On the other hand, when it comes to gardening, compost is your most valuable asset. Take a moment to imagine a greener lawn, tastier veggies, and a garden that's a made-in-heaven dream to maintain.

**Let's do this!**

## **1) Compost bin is too SMALL**

For compost to heat up properly, the minimum size for a compost pile is 3x3x3 feet. Much smaller, and there isn't enough mass to heat up properly and stay hot.

Sadly, most rotating tumblers and stand-alone bins are woefully undersized. And most marketing claims are misleading. "Finished compost in two weeks!" one brochure said. What really happens is that materials pack down and turn into slush. Composting can take many months, even years.

### **Solutions:**

1. Regard your tumbler as a 'cold compost' unit that will require more time.
2. Re-purpose your tumbler as a holding bin for collecting materials until such time as you make hot compost.
3. Build larger bins that measure at least 3x3x3 feet square.

4. If you don't have room for full-sized bins, there are many ways to compost. For example, dig-and-drop, trenching, and worm composting.
5. Add ingredients to your tumbler all at one time.
6. Set up your tumbler in the sun, if possible. (Not as critical for wood bins).

## 2) Compost is too DRY

Microbes, like us, need food, water, and air to thrive. Take any of those out of the equation and they die.

### Solutions:

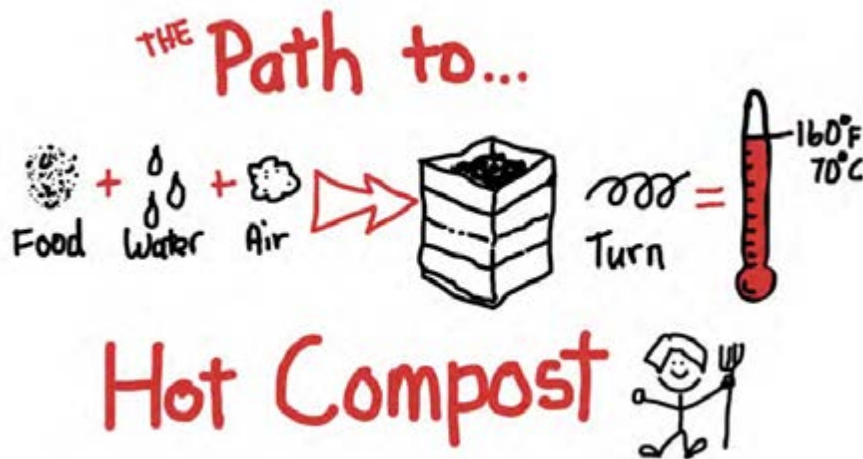
1. Poke holes in the pile when you moisten the ingredients to allow more water to seep down into the pile.
2. Remove materials from the bin. Then add them back in, spraying them with water as you go.
3. Reduce the size of sticks, twigs and other materials *before* building the pile.
4. Chop and shred materials each time you turn the pile.

## 3) Compost is too WET

Microbes drown (die) in compost piles that are too soggy and wet. Which means your compost stops working and starts stinking...

### Solutions:

1. Introduce more carbon (brown) materials such as leaves, straw, used coffee



grounds, wood chips, and dried grass.

2. Start a new pile and incorporating the soggy stuff with drier materials.

## 4) Compost pile needs turning

As your compost breaks down, oxygen is used up. And microbes, like us, need food, water, and air to thrive. Without it, the whole process slows down.

### Solutions:

1. Turn it often and totally! Rotate materials from the outside of the pile to the inside and visa-versa. Think of it as the ultimate upper body workout. If turning your compost is too difficult:

- A. Use a pitchfork with sharper tines.
- B. Take smaller "bites."
- C. Use a corkscrew-type aerator
- D. Pull all the ingredients out of the bin, toss it, then add it back in rather than turning it OVER the walls between compost bins.
- E. Ask for help.

## 5) Too many food scraps

When you continually add new materials such as food scraps to an active pile, it can slow the decomposition process. It's like diluting wine with water until you no longer taste the wine.

### **Solutions:**

- 1. Make your compost pile all at one time.
- 2. Once made, turn in more scraps only for a couple weeks. Then hold off adding any more.
- 3. At that point, store food scraps in a bin, mixing them with carbons to avoid a mucky mess).
- 4. And then incorporate the stored scraps into your next compost pile.



## 6) Not enough carbon (brown) material

Without enough carbon matter in the mix, wet and nitrogen-rich materials become slimy (smelly!), attracts pests, and break down much more slowly.

### **Solutions:**

1. Aim for a ratio of approximately 1 part nitrogen to 3 parts carbon.
2. Remember to chop or shred materials.

### 7) Not enough nitrogen (green) material

Nitrogen and protein-rich materials (also known as "greens") are the high-energy fuel that kick-starts a compost pile and keeps it hot. Happy microbes! Sources of nitrogen include: Green grass clippings, kitchen scraps, seaweed, fish meal, and manure.

#### **Solutions:**

1. Mix a ratio of 1 part nitrogen to 3 parts carbon (leaves, dried grass, pine needles). Don't stress out over exact ratios. Your compost will tell you how well it's working.
2. Know what's going on inside: Get a compost thermometer. It will become your best friend!



### 8) Ingredients are too big

As a general rule, the smaller the sticks, branches, weeds, and other materials, the easier it is for microbes to break them down.

#### **Solutions:**

1. Chop and shred materials *before* adding them to the mix.
2. Each time you turn the pile, shred as you go. Pretend you're shredding pork for 'pulled pork' sandwiches.

### 9) Are you a 'casual composter'?

I'll be frank here... Randomly tossing stuff in a pile in the corner of one's yard is the slowest way to make compost. It will take years. Plus, compost that is not

tended or turned often enough invites rats, ants, and other pests. And before you know it, you have plants, shrubs, and trees sprouting in your compost pile.

**Solutions:**

1. Set up your compost in a proper 'home' with a 3x3x3-foot minimum size bin.
2. Collect ingredients and build your compost all at once.



**10) Surprise! Nothing's wrong (your compost might be done!)**

A properly-made--and maintained--compost pile heats up and cools down like a roller-coaster. From start to finish, a 6-week timeframe is what you can expect.

That said, here are 3 ways to check for done-ness:

1. When finished, a compost pile measures 1/2 to 1/3 of its original size.
2. It should smell sweet, like a forest after a rain.
3. While the pile might still contain a few chunks, materials should look fairly uniform: Rich, dark, homogenous, and yes... Beautiful!

Finally, if you have questions, feel free to contact me. I'd love to know how this checklist works for you.

*Marion Owen*

Cheers,

Marion lives on Kodiak Island, Alaska, where she's been gardening and composting since 1986.

**EMAIL:** Marion@MarionOwenAlaska.com

**FACEBOOK:** Joy of Composting

**WEBSITE:** JoyofComposting.com

**YOUTUBE CHANNEL:** "It's Never Too Late" <https://www.youtube.com/ItsNeverTooLate>