

# ROTTEN PLEASURES

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A spiritual ritual for turning the compost?  
Absolutely. Although I hide my compost bin behind the shed, "compost corner" is one of my favorite spots in the garden. I like to begin the gardening year by saluting the compost bin, reading part of Walt Whitman's poem, "This Compost":

*Behold this compost! behold it well!  
Perhaps every mite has once form'd part of a sick person--yet behold!  
The grass of spring covers the prairies,  
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,  
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,  
The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,  
The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves,  
The tinge awakes over the willow-tree and the mulberry-tree,  
The he-birds carol mornings and evenings while the she-birds sit on their nests,  
The young of poultry break through the hatch'd eggs,  
The new-born of animals appear, the calf is dropt from the cow, the colt from the mare,  
Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato's dark green leaves,  
Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs bloom in the dooryards,  
The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead.*

The poet realizes that he, too, is compost ready-to-happen, but his message is not too morbid to contemplate. The idea of death bringing forth new life inspires me every year at this season of stirring, rebirth, and flourishing growth.

Readers should try their hand at making compost--it spares good material from landfills and reminds gardeners that death is a first step toward rebirth into new beauty. In terms of the bin, one could purchase any type or build one of wood or a ring of heavy wire mesh. I think I would build a tumbler (or buy one) for my next project, but that is not needed. Most bins are about 3 feet across, and they all have openings to admit air to the pile. I prefer a closed-top unit of black recycled plastic; the heat of the sun speeds up the "cooking" that breaks down the compost. Most anything except meat, bones, human waste or pet manure can go into the hopper. Avoid grass clippings treated with herbicides, plants sprayed with pesticides, and residue from tobacco products. My cigar butts probably encouraged wilt in my tomato plants: an example of my naivety as a new gardener. Experimenting is fun: a friend once got me elephant dung when a circus visited town. The huge turds--the size and shape of bowling balls--did not smell but had to be composted a year and mixed in well before going on edible plants. When "done" that batch of compost was amazing for the garden!

Whatever the ingredients, composting will be slower unless large items have been shredded or broken into small pieces. Compost must also be stirred periodically and it will not be finished for a few weeks to a year, depending on the size of the pile and use of a closed or open bin. The final product looks like moist, rich soil without too many identifiable ingredients--onion tops, celery stalks, egg shells, elephant poop. The compost must not be soaking wet, smelly, or dried out. My recipe: add shredded leaves and stir overly wet or stinky compost to aerate the pile, add water to dry compost and turn it every week. In most closed compost bins with decent air circulation and a proper mixture of dry plant matter and wet kitchen scraps, the compost pile itself provides all the

moisture needed and supports red worms I use for fishing. Burying (in the garden not the pile) the bodies of the fish I fillet also amends the garden, but I bury them well so no scavenger will dig them up.

Compost is like a good stew, and each gardener can devise a favorite recipe. My stew used to consist only of kitchen scraps from a local restaurant and my own cooking. The resulting pile was too wet and slimy; I now alternate kitchen scraps with shredded leaves to provide a mixture much easier to work into the soil. I stir the compost every week when I remember, and as I do this I give thanks for the renewal happening under my shovel. Once the compost breaks down to the texture and consistence I described earlier, it can be dug in before planting time or placed as "side dressing" to fertilize established plants.

Whitman's poem describes all of human existence; in the end, the Mother of All Life composts us, one and all. And from us and our compost grow the good things of the earth. May you and your garden be blessed this season.

### References & Further Reading

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