

A STEADING CODEX FIELD GUIDE

Your First Compost Pile

Scraps and leaves to finished compost — the whole cycle, once through.

Composting is just feeding microbes the right diet and keeping them fed, watered, and breathing. Get the balance roughly right and heat does the rest. Here's a first pile from build to finished compost — with the batch log that turns guesswork into a repeatable recipe.

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The four ingredients

Greens, browns, water, and air — in that balance.

Compost microbes eat a diet of carbon and nitrogen. In garden terms: **browns** (carbon — dry leaves, cardboard, straw) and **greens** (nitrogen — kitchen scraps, grass, manure). Aim for roughly **3 parts browns to 1 part greens** by volume and you'll be close enough.

Gather before you build

- Browns: a stash of dry leaves, shredded cardboard, or straw — most people don't keep enough
- Greens: kitchen scraps, fresh grass, coffee grounds
- A spot: about a cubic yard, on bare soil, with a little shade
- Water, and a fork to turn with

Layer, size, moisten

Big enough to heat, damp enough to work.

Build it in layers like a lasagne — a thick layer of browns, a thinner layer of greens, repeat — and wet each layer as you go to **wrung-out-sponge damp**. Too dry and nothing happens; too wet and it goes slimy and airless.

Size matters more than anything: build the pile to at least about **a cubic yard**. Below that it can't hold its own heat, and heat is what makes fast, weed-free compost. A small pile still composts — just slowly and cold.

What happens next

It cooks, then it cools — and turning is how you feed the fire.

Get the balance and the moisture right and within days the centre heats up — microbes multiplying, generating warmth. A hot pile can reach the **131–149°F (55–65°C)** band, which is the range that kills weed seeds and pathogens if you **hold it there and turn** so all the material passes through the hot core.

When it cools, that's the food and air running low. **Turn it** — outside to inside, edges to centre — add water if it's dried out, and it fires back up. Each turn is a feed. If it climbs above ~160°F, turn it to cool; you're cooking off the good microbes too.

Managing it

Turn, moisten, and read the pile.

Turn every week or two while it's active, keep it sponge-damp, and let the pile tell you what it needs.

Read the pile

- Rotten-egg smell → too wet and airless: turn, add dry browns
- Ammonia smell → too much green: add carbon
- Won't heat → too small, too dry, or too few greens: add mass, water, greens
- Dry and static → water to sponge-damp and turn

Finished, then cured

Dark, crumbly, sweet-smelling — then a rest.

Finished compost is **dark and crumbly**, smells of clean earth, and you can no longer make out what went into it — no recognisable scraps. It won't reheat after a turn because the food is used up.

Give it a **cure**: let it rest a few weeks after it stops heating so it stabilises and mellows. Fresh, un-cured compost dug straight into a bed can rob nitrogen and check your plants; cured compost only gives.

Where it goes

A little, often — and a short list of never.

Spread an inch or two over beds and rake it in, mix it into potting soil, or side-dress hungry plants. You rarely need more than a shallow layer; compost is a soil improver, not a mulch you pile on.

Keep out of a basic backyard pile: **meat, dairy, oils, and pet or human waste** (pests and pathogens). And treat raw manure carefully — either hot-compost it fully, or work it into soil well before harvest, especially for anything you eat raw.

Compost batch log

Temperature, moisture, and every turn — the recipe you can repeat.

DATE	TEMP	MOISTURE	TURNUED?	ADDED (BROWNS / GREENS / WATER)	NOTES

YOU'VE GOT THE GUIDE

Now keep the record. The full ledger is *Soil Soul*.

The log at the back is one sheet from Soil Soul — a 100+ page working field journal for the whole season, not just this guide: structured logs, reference decks, and season reviews. If this helped, that's where the rest of it lives.

See the full journal → thesteadingcodex.com/volumes/soil-soul

Or the whole system → thesteadingcodex.com/collection