

Using the Pfeiffer BD Compost Starter in the Home Garden

(adapted from John and Helen Philbrick's *Gardening for Health and Nutrition: An Introduction to the Method of Biodynamic Gardening*)

We have used the Pfeiffer BD Compost Starter purchased by mail for our biodynamic compost heaps. We usually order several packets at a time and have them on hand for building compost heaps both in spring and in the fall. The starter is dehydrated and does not have to be refrigerated.

These are the directions we follow if we are building a pile all at once: the evening before starting to build the compost heap, we put three tablespoons of starter in an old cup. We then add non-chlorinated water, a little at a time, stirring until the starter is moist but not wet. This is allowed to stand overnight. Next morning the cup of starter is diluted in several gallons of water and this is sprinkled on the compost with every layer. We use a whisk broom to sprinkle the water so that it is thoroughly distributed in fine drops throughout the heap.

How to Build a Compost Heap

Usually we have several compost heaps in progress, some of which are built up little by little as we add materials every day or two. We also build one or two heaps which are completed in one day. We always try to get the job done as quickly as possible, but it takes several hours to construct one large heap. All the materials are assembled, and we have the Pfeiffer BD Compost Starter prepared the night before. Dressed for the job we gather wheelbarrow, hoes, shovels, pitchforks, and whatever else will be needed, including a hose if the weather is dry.

The word "heap" may give a false impression. To be at its best, compost should not be thrown together in haphazard fashion, but should be laid down carefully in well-planned layers. First decide how large the heap is to be. We have found six feet by ten feet a good dimension. Dig the space to the depth of the shovel, keeping the dug-out soil in a pile at one side where it will be available for covering later. Build the first layer of some heavy material next to the ground. Hard weed stalks of tough weedy brush lift the pile somewhat from the earth and allow a little drainage of moisture and circulation of air.

The layers are built up, repeating the same sequence over and over, until the pile is about four feet high.

This is the sequence of the layers:

1. *Three to six inches of straw, leaves, weeds or other vegetable material.*
2. *An inch of hen manure, barn dressing (the urine-saturated straw which was used for bedding the cattle is also considered as manure).*
3. *An inch or so of topsoil, depending on the texture of the soil—more if it is sandy, less if it is heavier with clay.*
4. *A very fine sprinkling of lime.*

The moistened Pfeiffer BD Compost Starter dissolved in water is sprinkled on each layer in order to distribute it evenly. Although the amount seems insignificant, the bacteria are powerful and will multiply by the billions as the compost ripens.

Layers 1, 2, 3, and 4 should be repeated, building each layer slightly smaller than the one below it to make the sides of the heap slope inward toward the top. The layers should be built up to a height of four feet with sides sloping slightly inward and the top flat or slightly hollowed.

The top is slightly hollowed out to form a trough running the length of the heap to catch and hold the rain and the snow. Every two linear feet of a heap of this size will represent approximately one ton of finished compost. If the heap is about four feet high when first finished, it will shrink to about one and one half or two feet when it is ripe. The outside of the heap should be covered with a thin layer of earth which forms a skin and protects the heap from drying out too fast. Experience with the kind of soil in your garden can tell you exactly how thick to make this skin. If it is too thin, the wind will evaporate the moisture through the skin and the compost inside will dry out. If it is too thick, it will be too heavy and in a wet season the compost inside will remain wet and soggy. In a hot, dry, windy climate it may be necessary to cover the heap with straw or hay or even cornstalks to insulate and keep it cool and moist inside. In a dark rainy season it may be necessary to punch holes with a crowbar to let in the air. Only actual experience with the feel of well-made compost will tell what it needs. But observation is a good teacher, and one learns quickly to recognize the conditions and to know what to do. If the compost pile feels springy when you step lightly upon the edge, it is probably in good condition, fermenting inside and carrying on its own life through the action of the living bacteria within.

These directions assume that you have collected piles of materials and that you build the compost heap all in one day. It is also practical to build up one end of the pile and add to it every day as table scraps and lawn clippings come to hand. If some lime and earth are kept nearby, they can be sprinkled on each layer of garbage, the lime first—but very sparingly—and the earth last to make sufficient covering to keep dogs, mice, and flies away. Using Pfeiffer BD Compost Starter in a pepper shaker and adding it to the garbage as it leaves the kitchen, renders the materials inoffensive almost immediately and uninteresting to dogs. The latter will not trouble a compost heap once the process of fermentation is under way. If necessary a large piece of poultry netting covering the heap will keep dogs and hens from scratching in it. If it is built up day by day, it is especially important to see that the layers are damp when laid down and that it does not dry out completely before it is finished. It is better not to have to soak it with water after it has dried out.

If bacterial starter is not used, fermentation will still take place, but it will be haphazard and may not completely permeate the heap. In such a case the temperature of the heap may rise rather high at first (124-150 degrees F), but it will cool down later. If such a heap seems to be standing still and not decomposing fast enough, it may be turned with a pitchfork. The exposure of the interior to oxygen speeds up the process of decomposition, but it may also cause too much combustion and burn away much of the goodness in the heap. If the heap gets too hot, it may be cooled down by wetting with a hose.