

Trench Composting

Trench composting, or trenching, is a way of composting by burying food scraps directly in the garden. This method of composting is effective for materials that attract rodents such as meat, dairy, breads and cooked foods. It is also a safe way to compost pet waste. Trenching is a great way of depositing nutrients into your soil at the exact place where plants need it -- at their root zones.

Effort Scale:

Easy	1	2	3	4	5	Hard	Involves some deep digging and a system for remembering where you buried your scraps.
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Trenching is the act of burying your organic waste directly into your garden soil. The advantage of this method over conventional composting is that it enables you to compost meat, grains, dairy and cooked foods in addition to other kitchen scraps. Because these items attract rodents and flies, we recommend that you don't put them into your regular compost. By burying them in a trench you can avoid these problems, since rodents should not be able to access the material if it is covered by at least 30-45 cm (12-18") of soil. All you need is a shovel!

Trenching is also a safe method for composting pet waste. Because the waste is buried in the ground, the risk of pathogen spread is very unlikely. However, you should not trench your pet waste within 10 feet of edible food crops.

Trenching is an excellent method to use in combination with growing annual plants, especially heavy feeding plants like cabbage, corn and squash. It also encourages the development of deep, water conserving root systems. Trenching creates an underground band of nutrient-rich humus for your plants. This is a slower composting process than that which occurs in a well-managed backyard bin, but the trenched materials will retain more nitrogen during the process.

How to do it:

1. Dig a hole or trench in your garden 45-60 cm (18-24") deep and as wide and long as is practical -- a shovel's width is usually fine. Pile the soil up beside your trench.
2. Fill the bottom 15 cm (6") of your trench with your nutrient-rich food waste and organic materials. Make sure the materials are quite moist before you bury them. Fill in the hole with the excavated soil, making sure there is at least 30-45 cm (12-18") of soil on top of them.

3. Protect the soil with a layer of organic mulch material (i.e. leaves or straw). Alternatively, you can also sow a cover crop to protect the soil from the elements and suppress weeds in the time it takes for the trenched materials to decompose.



When to Trench

You can trench compost at any time of the year. Trenching in late fall ensures that your soil is ready for your heavy feeding spring and summer plants. Regardless of the time of year, trenching will build up the soil's nutrient and organic matter content.

Can I Plant Into a Fresh Trench?

In well-drained, humus-rich soil where microorganisms abound, trenched materials will break down over the course of 2-3 months. In poorly drained mineral soils, the process could take a year or longer.

Can I Plant Into a Fresh Trench? (cont'd)

There is much debate about how long you must wait before planting an edible crop into an area that has been trenched. Conventional literature states that you should wait several months before planting into a trench. However, some organic gardening methods involve deeply burying active organic waste like hay, manure, okara (tofu by-product), or other organic materials and planting into them immediately. This method is particularly effective for growing heavy feeding crops like squash or tomatoes.



Heavy feeding plants like tomatoes can benefit from being planted in a fresh trench.

Trenching Pet Waste

If you are trenching pet waste, you should not plant food crops above your trench. You can plant ornamentals or bury the waste in an ornamentally-landscaped area of garden or yard. It can be a good idea to transplant ornamental trees or shrubs above a trench containing pet waste, as this ensures that it remains buried and inaccessible by children or animals, virtually eliminating any chance of potential pathogen spread. Though pathogen spread from pet feces is very rare, taking these precautions reduces the risk.

Post Hole Digger / Spot Trenching Method

Another method of trenching is to use a post-hole digger to dig a row of pits in a garden bed, or even just outside the drip line of a fruit tree (this is the ring underneath a tree's outermost branches where feeder roots are concentrated). This is called spot trenching, and can eliminate the trouble of saving up large enough amounts of food waste at a time to make it worthwhile to dig a trench. Spot trenching is also a good method to use for individual plants like squash and tomatoes, or when planting perennials.



Trenching Summary:

Trench composting offers some great advantages:

- It virtually eliminates all smell and rodent problems if materials are buried at least 45 cm (18") deep and well covered with garden soil.
- It requires no investment in containers or materials, all you need is a shovel!

Trenching Tip:

Use a system to mark where you have buried your scraps so you do not dig them up accidentally.

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