

A Recipe for Mudpies by Bonnie Turnbull

As I pitched compost from one pile to another, I reflected on how I have always played with dirt. I cherish a memory of making “mudpies” in my backyard. We put “cherries” inside: tiny red flowers that floated down all around us, magically, as if just for my sister and me.

But as a grown-up baker, I make my mudpies from scratch. I craft the dirt itself.

Normally, forty-percent of household “waste” is permanently entombed in a sterile landfill. Mine enriches my garden instead. I mix “garbage”, moisture, time and effort and create that wonderful, soft, moldable feel of compost, so much healthier for my small ecosystem than the pure decomposed granite--sand--natural to my yard.

I feel like an alchemist making gold, and in a way, I am. I am on metered water now, and I save money because compost-enriched soil holds the water right where it’s needed instead of letting it drain down past the roots.

Recipe for Compost Mudpies:

1 part GREEN.

Any fresh vegetable scraps from your kitchen will do—apple cores to zucchini ends—plus fresh greens from the yard like grass clippings. But be careful. Though eggshells would be a good calcium source, animal products of any kind may entice dinner guests of the unwanted kind. Avoid cooked vegetable matter, too, if oil or butter has been added.

1 part BROWN.

Any dry, light waste from plant sources - dried grass clippings, sawdust, newspapers, chopped-up pine needles (whole pine needles have a waxy coat that inhibits decomposition), and dead leaves.

Lightly toss them together.

You will have a faster result if the pile measures at least 3x3x3 feet. In winter, I pile my compost in a sunny corner so it is somewhat warmer and dryer. In summer, I move it to the wind-protected house shadow so it does not dry as fast.

Contain your compost in purchased tumblers mounted on wheels, homemade wooden wood cribs with sliding doors, or encircle it with chicken wire. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. The goal is to balance air flowing in without letting too much moisture out. Keep it as damp as a wrung-out sponge. Too drippy, and mold will grow. Too dry, and decomposition will all but stop.

Having more than one container will be useful as your system grows and you want to separate newer from older material.

Now set your oven timer for...well it depends...mainly on how much you play with your dirt.

Over the first few days, microbes will multiply and eat, multiply and eat... If you are brave enough, stick your hand into the pile and you will feel that it is warm. Fresh, nitrogen-rich plant material supplies them energy while the dead, dried carbon component supplies protein.

When the pile cools, the microbes are lacking something, usually air. So after a week, toss it to create new, tiny air pockets.

If, like a baker, you balance the ingredients and mix your concoction every week or so, you will sustain temperatures at 122-131 degrees. Then, your compost may be done in as little as six weeks. This perfectly balanced system, known as "hot composting" can create temperatures that run even higher, and if you sustain 140 degrees for three days running, all weed seeds will die and yield the highest quality compost.

I'm a somewhat haphazard baker. "Cold composting" is for the busy person, the one who can't, or won't fuss. Since decomposition is a natural process, it occurs over a wide range of conditions. With less frequent tossing, too small a pile, too dry or imprecise ratios of green to brown, different microbes will digest the plant matter over an astonishingly wide range of temperatures from freezing to nearly the boiling point. A healthy pile smells a little earthy, never foul, and is a sign that your system is working properly. However, there are downsides to cold composting. Weed seeds can remain viable and decomposition can take a year or more.

Slightly-larger critters enjoy your new dirt, too. Introducing the star of the show --- redworms! Native to Europe, they now inhabit every continent. If you build a compost pile, redworms will come. Eventually. They prefer cold composting and leave behind rich castings that promote even higher levels of microbial activity. Get a jump-start by purchasing your own redworms or worm-napping some from a friendly fellow composter. For seven years now, I have had compost piles both in Meyers and right in South Lake and have never been bothered by anything larger than redworms. I cannot say that it will never happen, but judging from what I see out my windows on garbage day, bears and the like stroll right on by, tempted by far richer food sources than my decomposing orange peels and carrot tops.