Health Precautions for Composting Food Scraps at Home

During this period of national emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, composting continues to keep organic resources local and makes a valuable soil amendment. Practiced safely, composting brings communities together while allowing social distancing, provides healthy outdoor activity, and fosters other positive activities, including gardening.

The following guidelines are intended for backyard or home composting sites where food scraps are composted:

1. Should you continue to operate your compost system during the Stay Home-Stay Safe/Shelter in place directives?



It's understandable if you're concerned about continuing to home compost given the COVID 19 outbreak.

Consider the answers to these questions when making decisions about managing your backyard composting system.

Do you already have a backyard compost site? If you decide to start or continue to Do you have composting experience? Do you need any backyard compost: additional composting information? Check with your local Solid Waste District for online (or outside – "social distancing") home composting trainings or do an Internet search for compost "how to" information. Identify alternatives for food scraps/organics management (such as nearby farms, community compost sites, transfer stations, or private hauler collection). If you decide to stop composting at home Put the active compost "to bed": Ensure that all feedstocks are integrated and

compost, or soil.

feel comfortable in doing so.

See page 2

Engage family members in the discussion! Remind them of the importance of diverting food scraps from the landfill. Discuss backyard composting safety protocols. If diverting food scraps to another program (e.g., a transfer station drop-off); review acceptable materials.

This quidance is not intended to override local, state, or national directives. If you have additional questions about backyard compost precautions, please contact your local solid waste management program, health department, or composting association; specific health concerns should be addressed with your physician. The Food and Drug Administration has a list of home cleaning products and US EPA has a list of approved disinfectants known to kill Covid-19. This guidance document was adapted from a number of sources, including United States Composting Council (USCC), BioCycle, and compost experts.

capped with a high carbon material, finished

• You can restart your compost system when you

2. If you decide to continue to compost food scraps at home:

If someone in the household is sick, food scraps should only be handled by individuals wearing disposable or washable gloves. Proper sanitizing of hands and surfaces touched by food scraps is essential.

A. Adopt changes to normal procedures

If at risk family members or neighbors assist in composting, practice social distancing, and avoid unnecessary contact with each other – no handshaking or hugging for greeting – but remember that socializing is important. Foster creative ideas for safe interactions (e.g., "air" hugs or air high 5s).

Ensure that all participants are using disposable or washable gloves and wipe down all points of multiple contact (bin handles, carbon scoops, etc.) after mixing materials into the system.

Consider use of certified compostable bags (ideally brands certified for home composting, that break down in cold/"slow" composting), to limit direct exposure to food scraps.

B. Personal
Protective
Equipment (PPE)

This includes disposable or washable gloves and face masks, or face shields (homemade masks are preferable to no masks).

All participants should wear PPE when handling and mixing raw feedstocks.

If using disposable or washable gloves or face masks, establish a protocol for collection and laundering:

- Gloves should be removed inside out.
- Place disposable gloves and face masks directly in trash.
- Place washable gloves and face masks in a bag or bin that can be transferred into a washing machine without further handling. If further handling cannot be avoided, hands should be washed with soap and warm water for 20-30 seconds immediately after handling).

Ideally, tools and equipment used for feedstock material handling and mixing should not be used for curing, screening, moving, or loading of finished compost products.

C. Tools &
Equipment
Considerations

If necessary, due to a limited number of tools, wash and sanitize tools. Dry tools in the sun if possible; this helps to sanitize, but is not adequate on its own.

Sanitize kitchen collection buckets, as well as all plastic, metal, & other often-touched parts of compost bins, storage bins, tools, and other surfaces which come in contact with food scraps and other feedstocks.

How to clean & sanitize?

Soap & warm water are best!

Guidance on

PPE may change – stay

informed &

up to date!

- Household cleaners
- Bleach solutions (¹/₃ cup per 1-gallon water)
- Alcohol solutions of at least 70% alcohol
- Or other <u>EPA approved</u> <u>sanitizing agent</u>

D. Consider temporary changes to materials composted Because coronaviruses may be more stable on cardboard, consider eliminating cardboard or paperboard as a feedstock.

As an additional precaution, eliminate tissues, paper towels and napkins. If these materials were significant sources of carbon at the site, be sure to identify alternative carbon sources (sawdust, leaves, etc.).

Do not compost disinfecting wipes. All wipes used in cleaning handles, compost bin lids, tools, etc. should be thrown in the trash. If washable rags are used, see guidelines for cleaning washable gloves.

Make sure composters practice regular and proper handwashing (wash hands with soap and water for 20-30 seconds, or while singing the "Happy Birthday" song 2-3 times). If possible, have hand washing stations or sanitizers available outside so that trips inside the home are limited. Hands should be washed and sanitized prior to using the restroom, eating, and when taking a break or stopping work.

E. Other things to consider

Composters should remove shoes and all PPE prior to entering the home. Clothes worn should be removed for laundering after compost-related work is completed for the day.

If possible, manage the home composting system so that temperatures rise (minimally 120 $^{\circ}$ F, ideally 131+ $^{\circ}$ F). Even if temperatures do not rise significantly, the virus will become inert in cold composting as materials decompose. Consult home composting resources for best management practices for *hot* home composting.

Regularly remind composters about wearing protective equipment, and use of sanitizers for cleaning hands, bins, tools, etc. If someone from outside your household comes to help you with your compost system, remind them about practicing social distancing and make sure that they understand and follow all of your safety protocols.

About Covid 19: Generally, the family of viruses that includes COVID-19 is less stable and are destroyed by oxidants, heat and sunlight. Research shows that "hot" composting (131+°F) kills the other strains of coronaviruses quickly; the time that it takes materials to decompose in any system, including cold composting, allows for natural die-off. Therefore, handling feedstocks that may be contaminated with COVID-19 is the primary concern for composters. Accordingly, precautions focus on practicing good hygiene and using personal protective equipment, especially during the feedstock mixing and turning phases

Composting for Community Resiliency

Home composting is a vital part of community infrastructure. It allows us to take action for a sustainable future by reducing methane-generating materials (greenhouse gases) in landfills; control our own recycling of these local organics to make valuable soil amendment. With precautions and commonsense, home and community composting, along with other options for diverting food scraps (through transfer stations, curbside collection), can continue to be practiced. Each of us, of course, needs to be responsible for our own health, that of our family's, and our community. *Prevention is the only meaningful strategy for containing this pandemic. This requires collective commitment to containment and transmission risk reduction. This is bigger than any of us individually; our actions affect our families and community.*