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Preventing Animal Nuisances in Small Scale Composting

Nuisance Proofing Your Compost

Rodents, racoons and even house pets can be a concern associated with backyard composting. They can be attracted to compost piles both as a source of food and a place to live. A central New York study reported that pests, including rats, were the third most common composting obstacle following lack of space and lack of knowledge.¹ Pest problems should not be underestimated, but they are not insurmountable. A few simple measures can help to evict current squatters or discourage animals from moving in on your compost pile.

Compost Management

Good compost management can deter pests while also accelerating the composting process. By considering what you put in your compost bin and how you manage it, you may prevent unwanted visitors. Do not add meat, chicken, fish, oils, cheese, or leftovers containing excessive oil or seasoning. Some people find eggshells to be a particular attractant while others have had no problems with eggshells. Where a problem persists, it may be necessary to avoid food scraps altogether. You may want to consider indoor vermicomposting for food waste. (See *Worm Composting Basics* for more information at: <http://compost.css.cornell.edu/worms/basics.html>). Do not add feces of carnivorous pets, including cat litter, to your compost pile. By following that advice you will also reduce the probability of adding parasites which can be present in the feces.

Taking care to avoid exposed food scraps can also help. The “dump and run” composter is liable to have more problems. When adding appropriate food scraps, first add yard waste around the inner wall of the bin. Add food scraps to the center of the pile and cover them with layering material such as grass, leaves, wood chips, soil or sawdust. (See *Lasagna Composting* for more information at: <http://csetompkins.org/>



Securing wire mesh over vents discourages nuisance visitors.

[compost/downloads/lasagnacomposting.pdf](#).) Turning your pile and keeping it moist will increase the temperature and speed up decomposition. It will also discourage animals that are looking for a dry, undisturbed bed. Be watchful for food that becomes exposed when you turn the compost. Carefully observe the vents and other open areas of the bin. Good “Binkeeping” including covering all food scraps is your best defense against all problems including attracting undesirable insects and other pests and keeping leachate under control.

Bin Location

Often animals are attracted by other food sources such as bird feeders, outside pet food bowls, garbage cans, fruit trees or berry bushes and use a nearby compost bin as a cozy bed. Or they may be snoozing in your stacked woodpile, carport, shed, or brush pile by day and munching on your compost pile by night. If possible, eliminate existing attractors. Locate your compost bin away from other nest locations or food sources.

FACT SHEET 2005

<http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/nuisance.pdf>

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Rodent-Proofing Your Bin

Vectors are able to burrow under and into your compost bin. Rats are able to chew through plastic bins, usually starting with the vents. Taking measures to prevent them from getting into your bin may discourage them. The way to do this will depend on your bin's construction. Some possible solutions include:

- Constructing your bin out of half inch hardware cloth or welded wire. (For instructions on building a welded wire bin see: <http://ccetompkins.org/compost/downloads/weldedwirebin.pdf>.)
- Wrapping your entire bin in 1/4" to 1/2" inch wire mesh. If your compost bin has vents, it may be necessary to cover them with wire mesh.
- Lining your bin with wire mesh. If your compost bin has vents, it may be necessary to cover them with wire mesh.
- A secure, tight-fitting lid is essential.
- Covering a wooden pallet with 1/4" to 1/2" wire mesh, then placing and securing your bin on top of the pallet.
- Digging out the soil below your bin and laying 3 to 4 inches of coarse gravel and 1/4" to 1/2" galvanized hardware cloth.
- Laying a solid foundation of concrete or patio stones underneath your bin. Be aware that this method may not provide adequate drainage for your compost pile.



Wood and wire bin



Hot box

Other Tips

An often-repeated bit of advice is to sprinkle cayenne pepper liberally around the compost pile. Or employ cats or dogs to patrol the area. If your problem is serious, call a professional service to catch and remove the animals. Then follow the advice above to prevent new unwelcome guests from moving in.



Two-bin system

¹ 2001. Tompkins County Compost Study. Prepared by: Cornell Cooperative Extension's Compost Education Program.

SMALL SCALE OR BACKYARD COMPOSTING RESOURCES

Small Scale or Backyard Composting web site - <http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/smallscale.htm>

Health and Safety Guidance for Small Scale Composting fact sheet - <http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/smallscaleguidance.pdf>

Home Composting fact sheet - <http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/compostbrochure.pdf>

NYS Small Scale Compost Demonstration Sites - http://compost.css.cornell.edu/maps.html#Holds_Demos=Yes

Compost: Truth or Consequences video - <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/11313>