

# How many leaves do I need?

People often ask how many leaves they should save for their compost pile. It's the right question to ask, because when making compost if you strike the correct balance of leaves and nitrogen-rich food scraps, you'll get rich, light, sweet-smelling compost. Get it wrong and your compost may stink terribly or be very slow to decompose.



So, how many leaves should you stockpile to make compost? Enough to fill your compost container.

Each time you add food scraps, add two or three times as much (by volume) leaves. One bucket from the kitchen? Add two or three buckets of leaves. (No, you don't need to use your bucket, just grab some handfuls or shovels-full of leaves until you've got the equivalent of two or three buckets.)

As you add material the pile will grow, but it will also shrink, by 1/3 to 1/2, as the material decomposes. By the time you fill your bin, you will use approximately one bin-worth of leaves.

Most people find it easiest to keep leaves right next to your compost pile. If you can shred them in the fall and place them next to your bin for easy access, that's great. Either in a bag, a separate container, or set up some chicken wire in a cylinder shape – having them within arm's reach is very convenient, especially if it is cold or rainy.

Now comes the “nothing is ever that simple” part: Not all leaves are created equal. Some common New England tree leaves like maple, butternut, birch, and black cherry, will decompose quickly and easily. Others, like oak and pine, contain more lignin and will decompose slower. Pine needles should only be added in limited quantities due to their acidic qualities UNLESS you plan to make compost for acid-loving plants like blueberries, azaleas, and holly or, of course, a pine tree.



All leaves decompose faster if shredded with a lawnmower or leaf shredder and are very helpful in making a “hot” compost.

Added bonus: You can use your leaves as mulch if you shred them first. Shredded leaves stay in place, don't form an impenetrable mat, and look attractive. They also help the soil retain water and provide their nutrients back to the soil as they break down. I also use shredded leaves for pathways and cover my garden beds with them over winter to feed the worms and keep nutrients in place. I prefer to put slow-decomposers like oak leaves in flower beds and pathways, where their slower decomposition is helpful, and not in the vegetable gardens. As an added bonus, using shredded leaves means you're not contributing to [cypress forest destruction](#) to mulch your plants.