



Composting and Mulching for Winter

Winter composting checklist

Set up and protect the pile

- Build or maintain a pile about 3×3×3 feet to help it hold heat.
- Surround the pile with leaves, straw, or similar browns as insulation.
- Cover with a lid, tarp, or plastic to shed rain and snow but still allow some air.

Feed the pile through winter

- Stockpile fall leaves, shredded paper/cardboard, and straw as browns.
- Add kitchen scraps in small batches, always burying them under a layer of browns.
- Chop large pieces (pumpkin, stems) so they break down more easily when the pile warms.

Monitor conditions

- Expect the outer layers to cool or freeze; decomposition will continue in the core during warm spells.
- Check moisture: aim for damp-sponge moist, not soggy or bone-dry; adjust as needed.
- Hold off on frequent turning in very cold weather; plan a thorough turn when temperatures rise.

Use finished or nearly finished compost

- Top-dress cleared beds with 1–2 inches of compost.
- Ring perennials and shrubs with compost to feed roots and soil life.
- Layer compost under mulch on empty beds for a winter “lasagna” effect.

Winter mulching checklist

Choose materials

- For beds and perennials: shredded leaves, straw, or other loose organic matter.
- For paths and woody plants: wood chips or coarse bark.
- Avoid piling mulch right against trunks or crowns.

Timing and prep

- Mulch after soil has cooled but before it freezes hard.
- Remove fresh weeds and any diseased plant debris first.
- Water very dry soil lightly so there is some moisture under the mulch going into winter.

Apply mulch

- Vegetable and flower beds: 2–4 inches of loose mulch over cleared soil.
- Root crops you plan to harvest: up to about 8–12 inches of straw or similar for easy digging.
- Perennials and small shrubs: a protective donut of mulch over the root zone, not on the stems.

Combine compost and mulch

- Spread compost first, then add mulch on top to protect and “hold” it in place.
- Mark or remember where you will pull mulch back in spring for early planting.