

# SELF

HAPPINESS

## Green special: Adventures in composting

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I'm not your typical New Yorker. I apologize when I bump into people—or when they bump into me. I think pedicures are silly. Most radical, I live in an apartment with a backyard, a luxury in space-cramped Manhattan. Six months ago, in that very backyard, I did another atypical thing: I started to compost, a process by which bacteria and other microorganisms, as well as bugs and worms, decompose organic waste (such as eggshells and apple cores) into a dirtlike material that now nourishes the flowers and plants in my garden.

My science-experiment-loving inner child couldn't wait to turn salad greens into dirt. For one thing, I grew up in eco-minded Eugene, Oregon, known for its tree huggers. My family left our grass clippings and leaves in a container for the neighborhood pickup, and my pals' families all had compost heaps. When I moved to NYC, I had to go out of my way to keep up my virtuous habits, carrying around soda bottles until I found a recycling can. More arduous, every Saturday, I took the subway 5 miles to a green market that had

a composting site to drop off my yard and kitchen scraps. But several months of carrying carrot peelings wore on me, convictions or no. So when I saw a flyer touting free composting workshops, I signed up.

I worried that my composting project might spur cockroaches—or worse, rats—to settle in my backyard. Several weeks later, Tara DePorte, program director at the Lower East Side Ecology Center, assuaged my fears. I learned that in landfills, bacteria breaks down waste in the absence of oxygen (a process known as anaerobic decomposition), generating methane, a gas that warms the atmosphere 21 times more than carbon dioxide. The good news? Much of what is now in those landfills (more than 25 percent) can be composted—put in a bin with holes, which ensures that air reaches the bacteria, organisms, bugs and worms, allowing them to break down the waste without releasing methane. "Composting isn't gross or smelly or time-intensive," DePorte explains, because the bin's openings keep oxygen moving, so it doesn't attract rodents or pests. "Not only will you reduce the trash stream, but you'll also improve air and soil quality. It has a domino effect." I left jazzed by the chance to do some good. If I composted only 5 pounds of scraps a week, I'd save a quarter-ton of waste from landfills in a year—and have rich fertilizer to nurture my stunted city-slicker zucchinis.

Back at home, I chose a spot in the garden for my Department of Sanitation—subsidized aluminum compost bin that I'd bought at the workshop for \$20. DePorte had explained that inside the bin, I'd need to mix my water-filled food scraps with leaves, shredded newspaper or sawdust to prevent them from becoming a soggy, rancid mess, then layer 3 inches of leaves or paper on top. I enlisted my fiancé in our first task: ripping The New York Times business section to shreds.

Out back, I dumped in the bits of produce I'd saved in large yogurt containers under the sink and tossed them with an equal volume of newspaper. I left a layer of paper on top and covered the bin with its tight-fitting lid to discourage unwanted visitors. As the weeks went by, I dumped in scraps, duly mixing with a shovel and covering with shredded newsprint. It took 15 minutes a week—less time than I devote to checking up on my friends on Facebook—and DePorte was right: no stink, no rats, not even a lone cockroach.

About six months in, I noticed espresso-colored soil beneath the scraps; it was time to harvest. I laid out a tarp and emptied the bin's contents. Among the newspaper clippings and corn cobs was the brown stuff no longer recognizable as paper and vegetables—pay dirt! My squeamishness swiftly shifted to fascination as I reflected on the journey of those apple cores and cucumber peels: from nourishing me to nourishing the basil I'll grow in my garden this summer. In this concrete jungle I call home, I'd managed to make

not only the dirt in my yard, but also the quality of my world a little richer.

### **You can compost!**

1. Buy a bin studded with holes (check out [Composters.com](http://Composters.com) for options). Place it outside.
2. Fill bin 3/4 full with leaves or newspaper. Add enough water so it resembles a damp sponge.
3. Toss in scraps (avoid meat, dairy and oil). Stir. Top with a 3-inch layer of newspaper or leaves.
4. Cover with a new 3-inch top layer of newspaper or leaves each time you add scraps to bin.
5. Stir pile monthly, replacing top layer. After about six months, compost forms at bottom. Dump contents. Return scraps to bin and re-cover. Place compost at base of plants as fertilizer.

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