

## Humus: Garden Gold!

The finished product of the composting process is sometimes called humus. It should be dark in color, crumbly in texture, with an earthy smell. Compost is considered mature humus when the biological process of decomposition has slowed. Most particles of waste should be completely broken down.

Using compost before it is ready is not recommended and can in fact harm your garden plants. When the organic matter is breaking down, microbe activity is still very high. These microbes will use up oxygen needed by plant roots to grow. Also, if the browns or carbon continue to break down, it will take important nitrogen from the soil, leaving the roots deficient in nitrogen.

Generally, with proper maintenance, you'll be able to collect your first batch of soil-enriching humus within a summer. With fewer turnings and without layering, the process may take up to two years. The time involved will vary greatly according to a number of factors. These are:

1. The ratio of browns and greens (carbon and nitrogen)
2. The amount of moisture
3. The amount of oxygen
4. The temperature of the compost pile
5. The particle size of your waste

(For more information, please refer to Information Leaflet #4 of this series.)

Gardeners who simply can't wait might consider having two bins, side by side – one for fresher material, and one to sit and "mature".

### Using the Finished Product

Compost should not be considered a fertilizer in itself. Most fertilizers have higher levels of some elements than most compost. However, added to soil, compost does increase the organic matter or nutrients in the soil. Hence, it could be considered an excellent amendment or additive. For more information on uses of compost, please refer to Information Leaflet #1 of this series.