



Home Organics Management Tumbler Composters

Tumbler composters usually consist of a barrel or drum mounted on a stand so the unit can be turned or “tumbled” around a central axis.

They can be mounted horizontally or vertically, both work well. Turning these units mixes air into the material inside the tumbler, which speeds up the decomposition process. It is possible that you may get a finished product faster than with passive backyard composting due to this increased aeration.



How Tumblers Work

Tumblers break down organic waste similar to backyard composters – relying on aerobic (oxygen rich) decomposition with the correct blend of nutrients and moisture. However, without direct contact with soil, maintenance of the microbes/conditions in your tumbler becomes even more important to keep the process going.

Look for tumblers that have enough space for your needs and avoid units that claim to produce finished compost in less than 4 weeks – compost needs to mature at least 6 weeks before it is stable and fit for use.

What Goes in a Tumbler

Tumblers accept the same kinds of organic waste as standard backyard composters.

Greens	Browns
- Fruit and veggie scraps - Fresh grass clippings - Fresh weeds and plants - Fresh animal manure (horse, chicken, cow) - Eggshells	- Fallen leaves - Straw - Chipped woody debris - Shredded newspaper - Sawdust - Dry grass clippings

Effort Scale



Involves weekly maintenance and monitoring. Might need another tumbler or system to use while first tumbler finishes.

Cost Scale



Cheaper, small models may cost ~\$100. Larger and/or wildlife resistant models can be as much as \$1000+.

Can cooked food go in a tumbler?

It is generally recommended that cooked food be kept out of compost systems. However, because tumbler composters are particularly rodent resistant, you may choose to add small amounts of cooked food to them.

Some tumblers claim to safely compost meat, but it is recommend to not including meat in your compost material, just to be on the safe side. Consider a food waste digester or pre-treatment appliance for diverting meat scraps and cooked food.



Pros and Cons of Tumbler Composters

There are a few things to consider when deciding whether to choose a tumbler composter over a standard backyard composter or other options.

Pros:

- Takes up less space and can be tidier than other systems due to being fully enclosed. They can therefore be a good fit for urban gardens where space is at a premium
- Keeping your pile aerated may be easier due to rotating mechanism as opposed to having to stir or flip a compost pile
- Great if you only need a small amount of compost or don't have lots of organic material to compost (i.e. small or no yard)
- More pest and wildlife resistant than composters that sit on the ground

Cons:

- More expensive than other composting systems (\$100 - \$1,000)
- Larger models can be difficult to turn when full
- Tumblers divided into two compartments have a relatively small capacity
- If you have a larger household you will likely need more than one or another composting system
- No contact with soil, prevents exchange of beneficial micro-organisms and limits the biodiversity in your finished product
- Fruit fly populations can be greater than in backyard composters because all materials are mixed instead of a layer of "browns" being left on top

Tips on How to Use a Tumbler

- Add equal amounts of greens and browns (1:1 ratio by volume)
- Maintain a moisture content like a wrung out sponge —add water if necessary
- When full, stop adding new material and allow to sit until all material has decomposed into a soil-like product, smells sweet and is dark brown (~6-8 weeks)
- Turn 1-4 times/week when adding fresh material and while letting material sit and finish
- When harvesting finished compost, sift out any larger pieces, toss them back into the tumbler to decompose further in a fresh round
- Like regular backyard, you don't need a "compost starter"
- 7.5ft³ models generally are large enough for a family of 4 with no yard, larger models are necessary for those with bigger gardens or more people in the household
- Doesn't need to be set in direct sunlight; if plastic then partial shade is best to avoid degradation from the heat of the sun
- Pay attention to how heavy the tumbler is getting, if it is too heavy to turn when totally full, then try just filling 2/3 full



Tumblers and Wildlife

Tumblers can attract bears and other wildlife like backyard composters and are generally not considered bear proof. Certain units can lock and have been shown to resist attempts from bears. Consider a Jora Composter or similar product if you want to tumbler compost and are concerned about wildlife. Otherwise, you can protect your composter with electrical fencing or store in a secured place.

**The RDCK does not specifically endorse Jora Composters. Jora Composters have been used in the RDCK to successfully compost food scraps in areas with healthy bear populations.*

This guide is derived from a series of Factsheets from the Compost Education Center. For more information and resources from the CEC, visit compost.bc.ca



Learn more at rdck.ca/organics