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# URBAN FARM CONFESSIONS

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BY GREG PETERSON

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We have a deep, dark secret at the Urban Farm. It's the reason our greens spring to life, our flowers are happy, and our plants are soooo healthy. Urban Farm visitors often look longingly at the thick mulch in our garden beds and ask us to divulge our secret.

I look them straight in the eye and tell them, "It's all in the compost."

Could it be that simple? You bet! Most of the time the heat and desert soils seem to consume organic material faster than we can add it. Building healthy soil by adding compost is the key to growing healthy plants.

Start by looking at the amount of organic material that you have to compost. If all you have are your kitchen scraps, traditional composting may not be your answer, as it requires a lot of organic material.

So is there any other way to create compost that doesn't require a PhD (stands for "pile it higher and deeper") in composting? Do not fret, as there are several other alternatives for producing compost that are much simpler and still accomplish the same results. I call these alternatives "noncomposting."

My favorite way of noncomposting is to feed the scraps to the chickens. I know your first reaction is "I can't keep chickens in my yard." Now I am not talking about roosters, just hens. Hens are very easy to keep and are effective at weeding and controlling bugs. They will eat your kitchen and yard scraps, provide lots of great compost material, and give you the added bonus of the occasional egg or two for your breakfast enjoyment.

The basic thing you need to know about chickens is that they like to have a coop area to roost in. I use the coop as a place to contain them for their first month, until they learn that this yard is their home. After that they can run wild in your yard if you like, with the caveat that they will eat any new tender plants that are coming up. So I have a designated chicken yard as their living space. There is also the option of building a chicken tractor (portable chicken coop) that you move around your yard so that the chickens do the work of preparing your beds for planting. As for the kitchen and yard scraps, I just put them in the coop area and the chickens do the composting.

Now if you aren't quite up for keeping chickens, you might try worms, which are much more innocuous. They do their own kind of digging, provide their own kind of manure and do a really good job of munching on your kitchen scraps. They are as easy to keep as putting a bucket under your sink with some shredded newspapers and worms. Or, you can add an old bathtub to some corner of your yard and

vermicompost away (the fancy word for worm composting).

One of my favorite methods of noncomposting is called lasagna gardening. It is a process by which you build the soil in your garden and compost at the same time. The name says it all. Start by putting down a layer of dry material usually one to three inches

deep. (I like using dried leaves, alfalfa hay or straw.) Then add a layer of manure to facilitate the slow composting, then another layer of dry material and manure. You can add layers to your heart's content and if you want to plant right away, dig a little hole, add some soil and plant. Over the course of a few months the layers break down and create awesome slow-cooked, composted soil. The added bonus is that you can take your kitchen scraps and tuck them into the lasagna garden and let nature take over.

As a general rule the smaller and more uniform the pieces of material going into the pile the faster the compost will cook. When using kitchen scraps, I suggest only using vegetable matter. Dairy and meat products don't seem to break down as readily and can attract pests.

Noncomposting is easy; it just takes some work to get it set up and running. At the Urban Farm composting happens, with chickens, worms, lasagna gardening and traditional composting. Using one or all of these methods just about guarantees you a great crop. Remember though, composting takes time, as does raising a great garden. Be patient and compost away.

*For Greg's advice on traditional composting, see [www.ediblephoenix.com](http://www.ediblephoenix.com) and click on "Articles".*

## CHICKENS AND WORMS



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Kathy Chamberlin  
Worms and castings.