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COVID-19 Composting Safety Guide

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GreenThumb Overview

NYC Parks GreenThumb is proud to be the nation's largest urban gardening program, assisting over 550 gardens and over 20,000 volunteer gardeners throughout New York City on 100 combined acres of open space. GreenThumb gardens create hubs of neighborhood pride while providing a myriad of environmental, health, economic, and social benefits to the neighborhoods in which they thrive.

The majority of GreenThumb gardens were abandoned lots transformed by volunteers into green spaces for relaxation, socializing, and growing food, or a combination. These community gardens are managed by neighborhood residents with GreenThumb support. Together GreenThumb and community gardeners make the city safer, healthier, stronger, and more sustainable.

GreenThumb's mission is to support and educate community gardens and urban farming across the five boroughs while preserving open space. By providing free garden materials, technical assistance, educational workshops, and seasonal programs, GreenThumb supports neighborhood volunteers who steward community gardens as active resources that strengthen communities.

GreenThumb has three teams that support gardeners and gardens:

Community Engagement

GreenThumb's Community Engagement Team is the first point of contact for our network of community and school gardens. Outreach Coordinators assist gardeners with community organizing and development. They also help garden groups with special projects and connect gardeners with a variety of available resources. In addition, our Youth Programming and School Garden Coordinator gives support to school gardens through the Grow to Learn citywide school garden initiative and administers the Youth Leadership Council, our annual volunteer program that engages youth in civic engagement and beautification projects at community gardens throughout the City.

Operations

GreenThumb Operations is our boots-on-the-ground team that provides material and operational support to both community and school gardens in addition to handling property management issues. You may find them delivering clean topsoil and lumber, preparing new garden sites for planting, making repairs, caring for trees in gardens, or inspecting conditions in gardens. The Operations team manages deliveries and seasonal supply distributions that provide gardens with the materials they need to grow.

Planning & Programs

GreenThumb's Planning and Programs Team lays the groundwork for GreenThumb's long-term success and provides gardeners access to the skills, support, and resources needed to flourish. In addition to leading GreenThumb's effort to expand our reach and impact, this team oversees the annual GreenThumb GrowTogether conference, Harvest Fair, Open Garden Day NYC, and other large events and programs. They also host 150+ workshops and numerous volunteer projects. The Planning and Programs Team implements grants and produces quarterly publications that advertise GreenThumb's

programs to gardeners and the general public. They oversee data analysis and complicated projects such as new garden builds and provide a variety of services to community gardeners.

Introduction

Many GreenThumb gardens host volunteer-run community composting operations or host food scrap drop-off sites. Due to COVID-19, curbside organics collection by the NYC Department of Sanitation is temporarily suspended and some food scrap drop-offs are currently closed. Because of these changes in the composting landscape, GreenThumb gardeners are seeing a growing public interest in composting at community gardens.

GreenThumb understands and uplifts the crucial role that community gardens play in sustainable waste management and supports community gardeners who wish to continue, expand, or begin community compost operations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This guide provides best practices and policies for community composting to promote health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this document is prepared with composting at GreenThumb gardens in mind, we hope it may be useful to other community compost sites and residential composters as well. We are grateful to our partners at the New York City Department of Sanitation for their guidance and EarthMatter NY for co-authoring this guide with us.

GreenThumb Garden Composting Policies During COVID-19

GreenThumb has made important service changes to community garden access during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the health and safety of our partners and the public. As of July 6, 2020, [at the discretion of each garden group, community gardens](#) operating on NYC Parks property may open to garden members as well as to members of the general public. Gardens are not required to host public open hours, and public events and gatherings inside gardens are still prohibited.

Garden groups that decide to open their gardens can compost on-site and accept public drop-offs of organic materials during COVID-19. As the pandemic continues to evolve, it is important to keep up to date on the latest information regarding GreenThumb's COVID-19 garden policies by visiting <https://greenthumb.nycgovparks.org/news>.

Garden groups that operate a public food scrap drop-off should expect to see a rise in public interest in dropping off organic materials at community gardens. Garden groups should prepare for this increase in demand and volume of organic materials by developing protocols. This document provides some guidance as outlined below. It is important for garden groups to assess their internal capacity to effectively manage and communicate expectations amongst garden members and the general public. Please review our [latest announcement](#) to learn more about the different factors to consider before opening to the public. You can also find this information in the Addendum at the end of this document.

COVID-19 Composting Safety Guidelines

The following sections discuss how to self-assess the capacity of your garden's compost site and provide safety recommendations for both compost sites and food scrap drop-offs. These considerations are presented in the context of COVID-19. However, at any time, composting at gardens is a serious commitment. Processing organic wastes requires time, space, and considerable physical labor. It is important that all compost sites are managed closely to avoid creating odors, attracting pests, or causing any other kind of nuisance or public health concern.

Composting Capacity Self-Assessment Checklist

Each garden group should reflect on its internal capacity to make an informed decision about whether to maintain, expand, or pause existing compost operations or to start new composting operations during COVID-19. The following questions can assist in having this discussion with members of your garden:

1. Should the group continue composting or take a break and why? All decisions should be made in accordance with the garden group's bylaws and decisions should be clearly communicated to all garden members.
2. If the group is new to composting or interested in expanding composting, how will you acquire the necessary shared tools, equipment, and cleaning, disinfecting, and sanitizing materials? Where will they be placed and stored within the garden?
3. If your garden group will be taking a break from composting, how will the group address leaves, plants, twigs and grass clippings from the garden as well as food scraps and compost that are currently being processed?
4. How will the group communicate changes to the garden's composting procedures amongst garden members and to the public? What type of signage is required?
5. What space is needed to maintain, start, or expand compost operations at your gardens?
6. Which members are able and willing to assist with community compost operations including processing organics and managing public drop-offs?
7. How will the garden group plan for and manage an increase in food scrap drop-offs?
8. How will you prepare for unexpected changes in the availability of garden members?
9. What is the process that the group will take to make changes to their composting protocols?
10. What kind of training or preparation will garden group members be required to undertake before a community composting operation is begun or expanded?
11. What partnerships will the group need to develop in order to manage a successful community composting operation?

Composting Operations & Maintenance Safety

Garden Members

- If you are feeling ill or have flu-like symptoms, please stay at home
- Wash hands thoroughly with water and soap for 20 seconds (or apply hand sanitizer and rub thoroughly for 20 seconds) when entering and leaving the garden.

- Wear gloves while touching shared surfaces and avoid touching your face. Recommended are freshly washed reusable gloves (instead of disposable gloves) to minimize the environmental impact.
- Wear a face covering and maintain social distancing of at least 6 feet for the full duration that you are in the garden.
- If you must cough or sneeze, please cover your nose and mouth with your elbow or shirt.
- Ensure all surfaces (tool handles, compost bucket handles, shared locks/gates) are disinfected before and after use. As an alternative to disposable paper towels, consider using rags for the cleaning solutions and washing them and hanging them to dry in the sun. Disinfection guidelines can be found on the [CDC website](#).
- Post signage explaining the garden group's COVID-19 composting status, safety procedures, and drop-off procedures for community gardeners and the public both inside and outside of the garden.
- Ensure all safety guidelines are communicated in advance, and regularly, to all garden members.

Feedstocks (Food Scraps, Garden Waste, Browns)

- Research has shown that the risk of COVID-19 transmission from food or food packaging is very low. Out of an abundance of caution, collected food scraps may be set aside for 24-72 hours before being processed. Consider creating a separate, rodent-proof area for securely storing containers of collected food scraps.
- Add browns like sawdust, wood chips or leaves in between collected food scraps to prevent odor.

Public Compost (Food Scrap) Drop-Offs

Acceptable Organic Materials

- Food scraps (except for meat, meat products, dairy, and excessive fats/oils) and yard waste are considered safe to compost.
- At this time, paper towels and napkins used for personal hygiene or to clean and disinfect surfaces should **not** be composted.
- Wipes of any kind (including those for cleaning, disinfecting, and personal hygiene) are **not** compostable.
- Clear, secured signage should indicate what is and is not accepted at the drop-off. Any additional instructions, such as how small to cut scraps, should also be noted.

Volume

Due to the suspension of DSNY organics collection programs, community gardens must be aware that the volume of compost drop-offs, from both garden members and the public, might increase, even if the garden group is not supportive of this. Each garden should use the checklist above, as well as the guidelines below, to develop a plan and ensure that their limits are not exceeded.

- Limit the time for public drop-offs and ensure that enough garden members can be present to manage the process, while being able to maintain social distancing.
- Determine the quantity of feedstock that the group can accept in preparation of the drop-off day. If necessary, end daily drop-off hours early and post signage to communicate that the group has reached capacity and cannot accept any more organic material. If possible, communicate in

advance via signage or other methods that the drop-off may need to end early in the event of overwhelming participation.

- Do not have unstaffed drop-offs as this may lead to trash accumulation and issues with odor and pests.
- Create a protocol for dealing with feedstock overflow. Determine if there are nearby community or backyard gardeners who may be able to accept some of the overflow.

Garden Member Protocols

- Staff the public drop-off with the fewest number of garden members necessary to cover responsibilities and to allow for social distancing of at least six feet between people at all times.
- Some roles and responsibilities to consider for the drop-off include:
 - Setting up collection bin area inside the garden
 - Using decals or mark six foot increments with tape from the drop-off bin or display other visuals to remind the public to stay at least six feet apart at all times
 - Reminding participants of the public drop-off safety protocols. Verbal reminders should be given loudly so that participants can hear while adhering to social distancing.
 - Ensuring that people remain six feet apart and follow drop-off protocols
 - Keeping track of how much material is being dropped-off, adding browns in between collected organics, and ending the drop-off once capacity is reached
 - Adding browns like sawdust or leaves in between collected food scraps
 - Keeping disinfectant bottles and materials stocked
 - [Disinfecting tools and frequently touched surfaces](#)
 - Moving donated organics inside of the garden and storing used equipment
 - Updating and installing signage as necessary communicating the garden's composting policy
- If you are feeling ill or have flu-like symptoms, please stay at home and do not participate in the drop-off.
- Wear face coverings and avoid touching your face for the full duration of your time at the garden.
- Wash hands thoroughly with water and soap for 20 seconds (or apply hand sanitizer and rub thoroughly for 20 seconds) before and after your shift and before and after breaks.
- Wear gloves while managing the drop-off and processing compost and avoid touching your face and multiple surfaces. Recommended are freshly washed reusable gloves (instead of disposable gloves) to minimize the environmental impact.

Drop-Off Procedures

- If you are feeling ill or have flu-like symptoms, please stay home and do not participate in the drop-off
- Require participants to wear masks while they drop-off organics at the garden
- Remain at least six feet apart from others at all times
- Have participants place their compost in open bins without garden members having to touch it. Keep bin lids stored inside the garden during the drop-off.
- Recommend that participants bring organics in paper bags or reusable containers. If they use a plastic bag for transporting scraps, they must carry it away and dispose of this themselves. This rule should be indicated on drop-off signage.
- As food scraps are collected a garden member must add browns (like leaves, paper, or sawdust) in between the layers
- When the bins are full, garden members may set them aside for 24-72 hours before adding the organic material to the compost pile.

Addendum

Factors for garden groups to consider before reopening to the public:

- **Garden group support and communication:** Does the garden group support the decision? How will the group continue to communicate and keep in touch? Will the garden group reevaluate the decision to reopen after a specific amount of time?
- **Group capacity:** How many members does the garden have, and what is their availability to ensure that all requirements above can be met?
- **Open hours:** Even if garden groups reopen to the public, they do not have to maintain the 20 hours of public access at this time. Groups should consider what public open hours will be, how will they be determined, and how the garden group will identify members to be present at the garden during open hours.
- **Garden size:** How large (or small) is the garden, and does the garden group have confidence that social distancing can be adhered to within the garden during public access?
- **Expected garden usage:** How do members of the public typically use the garden, and how might that change in the current environment?
- **Maximum occupancy:** Is the garden group establishing a maximum occupancy for the number of individuals inside the garden at any one time? How will that be communicated? Total occupancy may not exceed 25 people at one time; garden groups may choose a lower limit among themselves.
- **Cleaning:** Is the garden group able to regularly disinfect shared tools, equipment, and surfaces, including portable toilets? Will hand sanitizer or other means to wash hands be available?
- **Community composting:** If the garden group has an active composting operation, will you accept food scraps from neighbors? Can you do this safely? How is this being communicated? How will the group respond if the amount of food scraps overwhelms the group?
- **Signage:** What kind of signage should be prepared and hung to support safe public access to the garden? Will certain garden areas remain open to members only?
- **Garden clean-up:** What debris and other obstructions must be cleared up or stored away by the garden group before reopening to ensure that the garden is safe for visitors?
- **Illness and high-risk populations:** Does the garden group have members who are at high risk, or do members have friends and family that they will come into contact with who are at high risk? How will garden members who become ill be advised to refrain from gardening while sick?
- **Garden Membership:** Garden groups can continue to accept new members, at their discretion, if they believe that they can orient new members in accordance with all applicable requirements.
- **Review Current COVID-19 Information:** Gardeners should review current information and guidelines on COVID-19 on the [CDC](#) and [DOHMH webpage](#), especially with regard to populations at risk.
- **Trash removal:** What is the garden group's plan to safely collect and remove trash from the site?
- **Bylaws:** Are your group's bylaws and governance documents able to guide decision making, and even disagreements, on the many topics that are likely to arise in the coming months? GreenThumb can help your group update them if needed.