

How Long to Wait Before Using Horse Manure in a Garden

Written by Maggie Fry; Updated December 15, 2018

While it is not a good idea to put fresh horse manure directly on your garden, with a little effort this agricultural waste product can give your plants a real boost. Horse manure and bedding make excellent compost. You can also take advantage of the heat produced by the composting process to set up a hot bed to grow winter greens.



Too Hot to Handle

If you are starting a new garden bed that you do not plan to use for several months, you could spread fresh horse manure on it, but composting the manure before using it is the best idea. Although horse droppings contain less nitrogen than poultry or sheep manure, they can still damage young plants. Fresh manure also attracts flies and has a strong odor, and manure runoff can pollute nearby streams or lakes.

Composting

Horse manure is easy to compost and takes about four to six weeks to turn from stable waste to garden gold if you do it properly. Composting does take some effort. Constructing a pile 3 by 3 feet and 3 to 4 feet high helps the process to go faster. A purchased or constructed bin helps keep the contents in place. Moisture is also necessary for composting, so if it hasn't rained in a week or more, spray the pile using a garden hose just until you dampen the material slightly to the consistency of a well-wrung out sponge. If you've over-watered, add dried leaves to the pile.

Carbon-to-Nitrogen Ratio

The most important part of the composting process is the carbon-to-nitrogen ration. This is what allows you to turn fresh horse manure and bedding into finished compost in a few weeks. Layering the manure with dried leaves allows air to flow and keeps the pile from developing a foul odor. The ratio for horse manure is 15 parts carbon to one part nitrogen, so for every inch of horse manure added to the pile, add a 15-inch layer of high carbon material, such as dried plants or leaves.

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To go from fresh horse manure and bedding to finished compost in a month, make sure the pile gets enough oxygen. Turning the pile, ideally about three times per week, adds oxygen that speeds up the composting process. A properly built compost pile heats up to 130 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit as it works. When the pile no longer feels hot and the composted manure resembles dark brown garden soil, it is safe to use on your garden.

Hot Bed

Fresh manure transforms a cold frame for over-wintering plants into a hot frame where you can grow vegetables and plants even in the middle of winter. Cold frames, small garden enclosures covered by windows or heavy plastic lids, only keep plants from dying in freezing temperatures, but don't encourage plant growth. To make a hot frame, dig a two-foot hole underneath the frame, add about four inches of gravel for drainage, one foot of horse manure, tapped down and moistened with water, and six inches of garden soil. Check the temperature of the soil with a soil thermometer, and place your plants in the hot frame when the temperature registers between 70 to 75 F.

Caution

Hot compost piles can catch on fire, so be sure to locate your pile away from buildings or combustible materials. Do not smoke near a compost pile, and if the contents begin to smell like alcohol, don't add water but instead turn the pile to give it more air.

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