

“You see all these tools here on the table and I have to say the most important tool is your hands.”

SUBCHAPTERS

Useful and Beautiful Everyday
Tools

A Few Essential Knives

Cookware

Learn by Using Your Hands

The Importance of Compost

CHAPTER REVIEW

Alice keeps a limited amount of kitchen tools on hand and dislikes noisy appliances. One of her most-used tools is the mortar and pestle, and the Japanese version, the *suribachi*—inexpensive, portable, and multipurpose—is perfect for pounding garlic and making vinaigrette. A Japanese mandoline is useful for thin-slicing of vegetables for making quick shaved salads. Alice thinks of metal tongs as an extension of her hand during cooking and uses more aesthetically pleasing wooden tongs for serving. The tools that you are using every day can be both beautiful and useful.

Other essential tools are knives, wooden spoons, a rolling pin, a spider sieve for scooping things out of hot water or oil, and whisks of different sizes—Alice loves the tiny one she uses to make vinaigrettes and *aïoli*. You only need a few good, sharp knives to make great meals at home: a paring knife, a bread knife or serrated knife, and a chef's knife.

A steaming basket and a few sheet pans are perfect for steaming and roasting vegetables. Alice has a variety of cast-iron pans, a stockpot, and a few all-purpose sauté pans and saucepans—some of which are earthenware dishes made to go in the oven but also beautiful enough to go straight to the table. (You can find cast-iron pans in the thrift stores and flea markets and bring them back to life.) Most of Alice's mixing bowls are from secondhand stores or her travels and she likes to think of the journey she was on whenever she uses a bowl associated with a certain memory.

Alice always has a compost bucket in the kitchen, and she encourages everyone to do the same. Any organic scraps that result from your cooking that are not fish or meat can go into the bucket. Alice empties the bucket into the compost pile in the backyard, adding layers of straw, soil, or water as necessary. It is a simple but vital step in recycling nutrients back into the soil and taking care of the planet.

Your hands are your most important tool. They can check for temperature and ripeness, tear bread and snap apart cauliflower florets, toss a salad with just the right amount of dressing, and strip herbs from their stems. You get a lot of information about your cooking and your ingredients just from engaging in a more tactile and sensory way.

ALICE'S ESSENTIAL KITCHEN TOOLS

COOKING EQUIPMENT:

Knives and cutting board

Compost bucket

Cast-iron skillets: 6, 10, and 12 inches

12-inch stainless steel-lined sauté pan

1-quart saucepan

2- to 3-quart stainless steel-lined saucepan with lid

3- to 4-gallon stockpot

4- to 6-quart ovenproof pot with lid

Baking sheets and roasting pan

Earthenware and gratin dishes of various sizes

Steamer basket and sieves

Spider sieve

Salad spinner and colander

Bowls of various sizes

Japanese mandoline

Mortars and pestles of various sizes

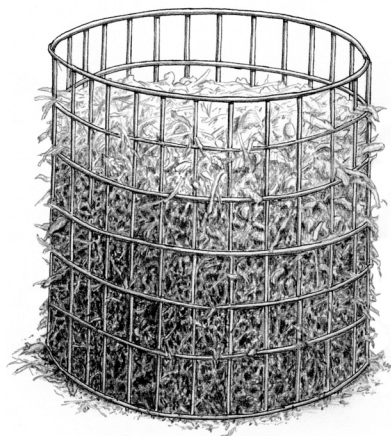
Rolling pin, and tart and pie pans

A selection of small tools: wooden spoons, spatulas, whisks, tongs, grater, pepper grinder, vegetable peeler, measuring cups and spoons, and corkscrew



BUILDING A COMPOST PILE

FROM *The Art of Simple Food II*, PAGES 364–366



Making a compost pile is a straightforward and enjoyable process; even if there is a hiccup here or there, in the end, you will have compost. The pile is built of alternating layers of brown and green elements, just as if you were making a large layer cake. A well-made compost pile is odorless and discreet.

Locate your pile out of direct sunlight; a shady area will help keep the pile moist. A compost bin is not necessary, especially if you live in a mild climate and have lots of room. You can make a bin or buy one. Look online for plans and descriptions and check your local municipalities, as many subsidize the cost of first-time bin purchases.

Spread a 4-inch layer of brown material (straw, dried grass clippings) over the bottom of a compost bin or the bottom of the pile location.

Moisten with water (a fine spray from the hose or a watering can). Use enough water on the layer to make it damp, but not soggy or dripping.

Spread on top a 2-inch layer of green material (vegetable scraps, garden trimmings, grass clippings). Don't worry if you don't have enough greens; the layer can be made incrementally.

Spread the unfinished layer with straw or other browns to keep flies away. Push aside the brown when adding more greens. When the layer is complete, cover with a 4-inch layer of brown material.

Moisten as above and keep building the pile, alternating layers just as if you were making a large layer cake, until the bin is filled or the pile is a few feet high. If desired, sprinkle the green layers with rock dust or other minerals.

After three months in warm weather, or six months in cold, turn the layers over into a second bin or pile, until you reach compost that has matured. (The compost on the bottom will be mature first.) Compost is ready and mature when none of its ingredients are recognizable and it is dark brown and easily crumbled. Sift the mature compost before adding it to the garden, returning any large pieces back into the pile, and continue the ongoing process of layering, turning, and making more compost.

ALICE'S ESSENTIAL KITCHEN TOOLS

NOTES

- ♦ If you are making compost for the first time, or would like to rejuvenate the microbial life of your soil, throw in a handful or two of locally occurring compost (take a bag with you on a walk in the woods or in a park and gather a handful of soil from under a log, a forest floor, or alongside a creek); or add compost from a neighbor's bin to introduce some new soil microbes.
- ♦ Add as many diverse ingredients to your pile as possible. This will give the compost a fuller spectrum of nutrients and microbes for the garden. Green ingredient options include organic coffee grounds from your local café; spent vegetables from the farmers' market or other organic food shops; and small amounts of litter from organically fed hamsters, guinea pigs, or chickens.
- ♦ Do not add weeds that have seeds (they will germinate and take over your garden); diseased plants; grass (or anything else) that has been treated with herbicide; manure from carnivores (dogs, cats, people); or meat and dairy products (which will compost, but also attract vermin).
- ♦ Compost should never smell bad. Smelliness is a sign of lack of oxygen due to compaction, too much green material, or too much moisture. To correct this problem, turn the pile to aerate it, and if it is too moist, add layers of brown material.
- ♦ Grass clippings can get matted together and become anaerobic and stinky. Let them dry for a day or two and add them to the pile in thin layers, or premix them with other brown materials before adding to the pile.
- ♦ If the compost does not seem to be breaking down, it is probably too dry. Turn it, moistening the layers as you go.
- ♦ To speed up the composting process, scatter compost from a previous pile or a purchased bag of live compost every layer or so to inoculate your pile with beneficial microorganisms.
- ♦ Use a long sturdy stick or metal pole (rebar) to poke holes in the pile for added aeration. Plunge the stick all the way to the bottom of the pile at intervals of about 5 inches. Aerate the pile again after turning.
- ♦ Only use mature compost in a growing garden; unfinished compost will continue to decompose, but it will tie up the nutrients in the soil. Coarse, unfinished compost can be used in the fall as mulch over beds that are wintering over.



ALICE'S ESSENTIAL KITCHEN TOOLS

VARIATIONS

- ♦ If you have a lot of material to compost, you can build the pile all at once. Make the pile a minimum of 3 feet square. Dampen the layers of green and brown evenly. The pile will become quite hot (up to 160°F) within a few days. (The heat is the product of the feeding activities of bacteria.) Once the heat begins to subside, turn the pile to aerate it and it will heat up again. Turn again, until the pile no longer heats up. The compost will usually be ready in about six weeks to three months.
- ♦ Leaves may be composted separately into leaf mold. Leaf mold is a marvelous aid for soil structure and water and air retention. Carbon-eating microbes love it. It is also a great ingredient for homemade potting soil and makes fantastic mulch. (Leaf mold is not high in nutrients, so regular compost should be added to soil and containers, too.) A large pile of leaves is needed to create the right environment for composting—4 to 5 feet square is recommended. Make the pile in layers, moistening them as you go. Let sit for six months to two years. To speed up the process run over the leaves a few times with a lawn mower before piling them up and turn the pile every few months, wetting the layers as needed. Leaf mold is ready when it is dark brown, soft, and crumbly.

LEARN MORE

- ♦ Read through the extended equipment list in *The Art of Simple Food*, pages 22–27.
- ♦ Read about worm composting in *The Art of Simple Food II*, pages 366–368.

