How to Compost a Dead Sheep

Several types of Composters can be constructed. This scan shows a composter made simply out of wooden panels that were put together to make a rectangle. Ideally, the sides of the composter will allow aeration. The composting process has several requirements other than the composter itself. There must be a source of carbon, a source of bacteria, air, and plenty of water (in addition to a dead sheep).

In the scan above, you can see that a dead ram has been placed in the composter. He was placed on about a foot of old straw which was taken out of the barn. Used bedding will work fine.

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How to Compost a Dead Sheep

The ram was placed on the straw. Then water about equal to the weight of the ram was added. Here the ram is being covered with well rotted barn waste (the older the better). The barn waste is the primary source of microorganisms that will start the composting process.

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How to Compost a Dead Sheep

Here a front panel has been added and then several more inches of old barn litter is being added. There needs to be about a foot of barn litter above the dead animal. If the carcass is covered up well, there will be virtually no odor during the composting process.

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How to Compost a Dead Sheep

Here the ram has been covered well. A top should be placed over the composter to prevent rain from running in. A top will also keep potential predators out.

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How to Compost a Dead Sheep

Composting is an aerobic process. This means that it works best when Oxygen is present. This is one reason that straw was placed below the animal. Actually the process will work faster if the compost is turned, but this is impractical because of the size of the carcasses used and not everyone has the equipment to turn the compost.

The bacteria that cause the composting process to work are heat producers. We measured the temperature of the compost pile. After 5 - 7 days, the temperature is usually up to 150 degrees F. If the temperature does not rise, composting is not occurring. After the temperature has peaked, it will then gradually decline over the next few weeks.

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How to Compost a Dead Sheep

Here is the uncovered composter after about 6 weeks. You see that the level of compost has dropped. This is largely because the carcass has "cooked away".

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Notice how much the pile has reduced in size after six weeks of composting. Next, we will open the pile to see what is left.

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How to Compost a Dead Sheep

Here is what is left of a 225 pound ram after six weeks. There was about 8 pounds of recognizable bones and wool. Surprisingly, there was no odor.

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How to Compost a Dead Sheep

Here you can see the appearance of bones after a few months of composting. Note that they are hollow.

Go to the next slide set in which we add another ram to the existing compost pile.

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See how to construct a composter.

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About three months after the first ram had been composted, we had another one to compost. (In case you wonder what our problem is, this second ram was obtained when our friends had a ram tied up in their trailer on the way to a fair, and he suffocated himself. So we asked if we could compost him.)

So here's what we did. First we dug into the composter, leaving about 8 inches of compost in the bottom.

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How to Compost Another Dead Sheep

Here, you can see that the ram has been placed in the composter and water is being added. With big sheep, it may be desirable to puncture the carcass.

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How to Compost Another Dead Sheep

Here the ram is being covered with compost. We could have used barn litter, but re-using the compost is not a problem.

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How to Compost Another Dead Sheep

The temperature of the compost should rise again, just like it did with any previous carcass. If the temperature doesn't rise, you probably didn't add enough water or the material that you are trying to compost with was too clean. Old barn litter is the best starter.

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How to Compost Another Dead Sheep

Here's the appearance of the uncovered composter after a couple of months.

See how to construct a composter.

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How to Build a Sheep Composter

After we were convinced that composting would work for adult sheep, we decided to build a more permanent composter to replace the temporary one that had been tested. Here is the composter that was built as a prototype for small sheep farm use. It has been used successfully for 4 years now. This composter was made of 2 x 6 treated lumber.
How to Build a Sheep Composter

We suggest that the size of the composter for a small sheep farm should be at least one foot wider and longer than the largest sheep you ever expect to compost. We used a 3 foot height.

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How to Build a Sheep Composter

We built the composter in four panels. The panels were held together at the corners with metal rods down eye bolts. This design was used because we wanted to be able to easily move the composter and wanted to be able to remove the composter from the pile if necessary.

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One panel was made with strap hinges to allow a drop down front. This was to make it easier to lift a dead sheep over the front. Metal hooks were placed on the inside to hold the front up in place.
How to Build a Sheep Composter

This view shows the drop down front.

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How to Build a Sheep Composter

A top was made by building a frame that would slip over the composter. Galvanized metal was used over the top of the frame. This top has never blown off after several years of use.

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How to Build a Sheep Composter

Here is the composter in place.

Click here to see this composter actually being used.

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Here, a high school student demonstrates how easy it can be to compost a lamb. After a year of testing, we moved the composter much closer to the barn so that we could have water available. Here you can see that a dead lamb has been placed on barn straw and water is being added.

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See how to build a composter.

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Composting a Sheep

Now the lamb is being covered with old barn litter. You may notice that the composter is now located not that far from the house. Odors and flies are not a problem if you compost correctly.

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See how to build a composter.

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Composting a Sheep

A foot of old barn litter is about the right amount.

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See how to build a composter.

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Composting a Sheep

It is very important to add plenty of water. We often just leave the water running as we add litter etc.

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See how to build a composter.

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Composting a Sheep

Continue covering with rotted barn litter.

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Composting a Sheep

In warm weather, you might like to put a layer of clean, dry straw over the top of the pile as you finish. This keeps flies from being attracted to the pile. However flies will seldom breed in a compost pile because the temperature gets warm enough that it kills fly eggs and larvae.

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See how to build a composter.

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Composting a Sheep

Here, the front of the composter is being raised.

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See how to build a composter.

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Composting a Sheep

The top is now slipped on and you just wait. You might want to check the temperature occasionally. Otherwise, the job is done. In several weeks, you will have nothing but a few bones left.

We have done some horticultural studies with the sheep compost. It worked great as a soil conditioner for a variety of plants.

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See how to build a composter.

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