



Advice Sheet

Make your own compost

Making compost mimics the natural process of decay by which nature recycles organic materials. The process is carried out by an army of microbes, fungi, worms and other invertebrates. There are many ways to make compost, so find out what works best for you.

Why make compost ?

Making compost is good for your garden, and good for the environment.

- By recycling kitchen and garden waste you reduce the amount of rubbish you produce, which is sent to landfill, which in turn can produce pollution and greenhouse gases which cause global warming.
- Compost is great for the garden, acting as a soil conditioner and natural fertiliser, growing strong healthy flowers and vegetables.

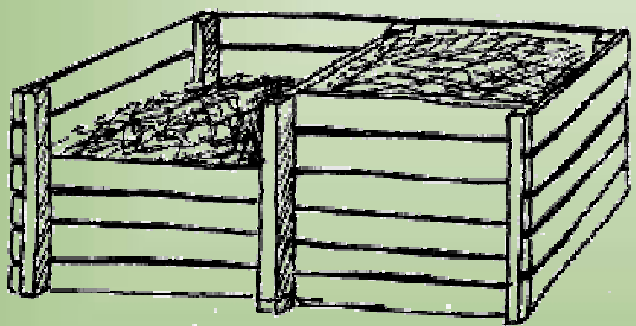
The compost bin

Most gardeners make compost in some form of container. This keeps the heap together and helps retain warmth and moisture. The container can be square or round, made of wood, plastic or even wire mesh. It should be open at the base, to let worms and other helpful creatures in and let excess liquid drain out. Some form of lid is useful to keep rain out and warmth in. Size varies, but about 1 cubic yard is ideal – if you want to make a lot of compost go for several bins rather than one huge one. Keen composters usually have at least two bins – one rotting down while they fill the other.

There are very good plastic bins for sale – these have a tight fitting lid and retain heat well. If you want to build your own why not use recycled timber – old floor boards are ideal for making a wooden bin. Old pallets could also be used to make a bin, line with pieces of old carpet to keep compost and moisture in.



A modern plastic bin: these are cheap, neat, and make very good compost



A traditional double bin made of wood. The front slats are removable for easy access



What to put in

An ideal compost bin has a mixture of two types of waste, green wet material and dry woody material. Soft green material such as grass cuttings and young weeds contain lots of nitrogen and water and will rot quickly, generating lots of heat, but as they have little structure too much of these results in a wet slimy heap. Materials such as wood chippings, autumn leaves and cardboard are low in water and high in carbon. They rot very slowly but keep their structure well, and so help to balance the wet ingredients. A mixture of wet nitrogenous waste and dry carbon waste should produce excellent compost.

Things to Compost

Fast composters	Slow rotters	Things not to compost
<p>Anything organic (i.e. anything that was once alive) will decay given time, but these are the quickest decomposers</p> <p>Kitchen scraps - Fruit and vegetable peelings, used tea bags, coffee grounds</p> <p>Cardboard – insides of toilet rolls, egg boxes, used paper towels</p> <p>Waste from cleaning out rabbits, mice, gerbils etc.</p> <p>Any dead material from the garden - Dead plants and flowers, old bedding plants, annual weeds</p> <p>Grass mowing – mix well with more bulky ingredients, as on their own they can compact into an anaerobic slimy mat.</p>	<p>The following will compost, but take a long time to rot down, so should be avoided if you want quick results, or put in a separate heap</p> <p>Autumn leaves (better kept for leaf mould)</p> <p>Woody hedge clippings and prunings (shred if possible)</p> <p>Sawdust</p> <p>Old pure wool jumpers</p>	<p>Plastic, glass or metal – these can be recycled separately</p> <p>Cat litter</p> <p>Dog faeces</p> <p>Nappies</p> <p>Meat (it may attract rats)</p> <p>Cardboard with a foil or plastic film attached (e.g. drinks cartons)</p> <p>Perennial weeds</p> <p>Diseased plant material (disease spores will only be killed if the heap gets very hot)</p> <p>Newspaper – this will compost but is better sent for recycling</p>

The other essentials for good compost are air and water. The mixture needs air spaces and to be moist, but not water-logged.

Getting Started

- Put your bin somewhere easily accessible, preferably standing on bare earth so worms and other soil organisms can move up into the heap.
- Putting a layer of twiggy material in the bottom will help with ventilation.
- In a perfect world you would collect enough material to fill the bin in one go, but this is rarely possible. If you can collect enough material to put in a layer at least 12" thick this will get your compost off to a good start - mow the lawn, do some weeding, trim the hedge etc.
- Put all your gathered waste in the bin, mixing it all together and spreading it to the edges of the bin.
- If the mix is dry, water it well. Moisture is needed to keep alive the organisms that will make your compost.



Activators

Activators are materials which get the composting process off to a flying start. Grass cuttings and comfrey leaves will do this. Some people add a thin layer of garden soil or mature compost, to add soil microbes to the heap. Anything high in nitrogen will help kick-start the composting process – try grass cuttings, comfrey leaves or urine.

How long does it take?

This varies with the time of year and what you compost, from a couple of months to over a year. If the bin can be filled in one go the micro-organisms will go to work on the whole lot, and in the process generate a lot of heat. compost heap made this way can get very warm – the heat will kill many weed

Most people fill their compost bins more slowly, as material comes available. As less heat is generated the composting process is much slower, but the final product is just as full of nutrients. As the heap rots you will find it settles downwards, so you can keep putting more into the bin. seeds and disease spores, and the compost will be ready very quickly, as little as two months.

Turning the heap

When the composting process appears to be complete, and the heap is cooling down, it can be helpful to turn it. This means mixing up all the material in the bin, and allows you to inspect the contents of your heap and remove any finished compost. Some people find it easiest to fork everything into an empty bin. Turning the heap allows uncomposted fragments at the edges to be incorporated into the main mass, and gets plenty of air in. Turning often restarts the composting process and improves the end product.

What to do with the finished compost

- Compost can be dug into the soil, where it encourages microscopic soil life, making the soil healthier and increasing nutrient availability to plants. It also improves the structure of the soil, helping to break up clay soils and making sandy soils more moisture retentive.
- Another way to use compost is to lay it on the surface as a weed suppressing mulch. Worms and other soil organisms and leaching will gradually move the nutrients down into the soil, so this is a good way to feed permanent plantings such as fruit bushes, shrubs, trees and perennials.
- Good compost can also be used for pot plants, hanging baskets and containers

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