

Guide to home composting

Introduction

It is truly amazing how, through the magic of nature, materials like vegetable peelings, weeds, hedge clippings and other garden waste can be turned into rich, fertile compost, simply by putting them into a home compost bin. Composting is great for the garden, but, of course, recycling waste in this way is great for the environment too.

In this complete guide to Home Composting, you will find all you need to know. It shows you how to get started and how to be successful with your composting. It also gives you tips and ideas on how you can make the best use of finished compost. Like most things, composting is easy, once you know how.

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Why make compost

Compost is great for your garden

- Compost improves the soil, whatever type you've got.
- Compost helps keep the soil moist, so there's less need to water.
- Compost can be used all over the garden – on lawns, shrubs, fruit, vegetables and even pots and tubs.
- Compost-fed soil grows healthy plants, more resistant to pests and diseases.
- Compost can be used in place of purchased fertilisers and mulches, saving you money too.

Home composting is good for the environment

- It saves journeys to the tip.
- It removes the need for bonfires.
- It helps reduce the need for new sites for landfill.
- It cuts greenhouse gases produced by landfill sites.

Where can I put my compost bin?

- You may not have a lot of choice as to where you put your compost bin, but here are some hints and tips to help you pick the best spot.
- Put the bin on bare soil so that any liquid produced can drain away, and worms and other compost making creatures can easily get into the bin.
- You can put a compost bin on the lawn, but the grass underneath may die.
- Only put the bin on hard standing or paving as a very last resort. Put a thick layer of newspaper or cardboard in the bottom of the bin to soak up some of the liquid the heap will produce. Add some finished compost to prime the heap.

- Make a permanent spot for the bin, or move it around each time you start a new heap. The ground where a compost heap has been will be very fertile - a good place to grow tomatoes or courgettes for example.
- Make sure you can get to the bin easily, all year round. Leave enough access space for a wheelbarrow if you use one.
- Leave some working space around the bin - so you can pre-mix ingredients and so you can get the finished compost out easily.
- If you have the option, put the bin somewhere that gets some sun - but don't worry if it has to be in the shade or under a tree.

What can I put in my compost bin?

Weeds, fruit and vegetable scraps, grass mowings and other items of plant or animal origin will compost. So will things like paper and wool that were once living.

BUT just because something will compost, doesn't always mean that it is suitable for a domestic compost heap. For various reasons, some items should not be composted. Stones, cans, plastic and other things that are not of living origin will not compost.

Compost know how

Making compost is simple. All you need to do is add things that will compost to your compost bin as they become available. A whole host of naturally occurring compost creatures - from microbes to worms - will move in and do the rest of the work for you, converting 'rubbish' to useful, soil improving, compost.

Compost know how - collecting the stuff to compost

Every time you put material into your bin, it is best to add as much as you can,

adding both 'Greens and Browns' (see below) so you get good compost. It can be helpful to store some 'Browns' so you have them to hand to balance out the 'Greens' which tend to be more common.

Kitchen scraps - Collect kitchen scraps in a small bin and empty it on the compost heap every few days. Don't add any liquid to this collection bin. Add scrumpled up kitchen paper, paper bags, cardboard egg boxes etc to soak up excess liquid and help keep the bin fresh.

Green garden waste - This type of material will start to rot quite quickly on its own. Add it to the compost heap within a few days of collection.

Grass mowings - These rot very quickly, often producing a lot of heat. They are best added to the compost heap soon after mowing.

Tougher material - These are slow to rot and can be stored for some time (how long depends on how tough material) before composting. It is useful to have such materials to hand to mix with the 'Greens' to get a good balance in the compost heap.

Compost know how - filling the compost bin

- 1) Take the lid off the bin.
- 2) Add compostable items, remembering that you are aiming for a mixture of different types of material.
- 3) Spread the items out to the edges of the bin and firm down gently.
- 4) Water if dry.
- 5) Replace the lid.

Repeat the above regularly until the bin is full, or until at least six months have passed. The contents of your compost bin will settle and reduce in volume as they rot, so you may never actually fill the bin to the top if you don't have much to compost.

Compost know how - compost activators

A compost activator is something that gets the compost process started. Things like grass mowings, nettles and young plants that are quick to rot are natural activators. There is no need to buy a compost activator, though if you don't have access to 'natural' activators you may wish to do so.

The creatures that actually do the composting will appear of their own accord. There is no need to add them.

Compost know how - getting the mixture right

Greens and browns

To make good compost you need to put a mixture of different types of materials, Greens and Browns, into your compost bin.

Greens - Sappy, juicy, young plant materials rot quickly but turn into a smelly slimy mess on their own because they are low in fibre. 'Greens' get the composting process started.

Browns - At the other end of the scale, tough, is old plant material that can take ages to rot. Being high in fibre and low in water it provides food for the microbes. 'Browns' give structure to the finished compost.

Greens and browns - Many items in your compost heap will be a bit of both, 'Greens and Browns'.

Don't worry too much about exact proportions of 'Greens and Browns'. You will learn by experience and you can always adjust the balance if it seems to be going wrong. The creatures that convert waste into compost also need air and water to live and work.

Air - It is essential to have air in a compost heap so the creatures that make the compost can breathe. If a heap is rather smelly, this can indicate that it is short of air. If you are adding a lot of stuff that will slump down and exclude air (kitchen scraps or grass mowings for example) be sure to mix it with something that will create air pockets. Scrumpled card or paper works well, or any of the 'Browns'.

Water – Most things that you put into a compost heap contain a fair amount of water, so water is not usually in short supply. Mix drier items with some greens or water the material if it is too dry e.g. using a watering can. A dry heap is slow to rot and may be full of woodlice.

Compost know how - hot and cool composting

If you add a large batch of mixed materials to your compost bin in one go, it may get surprisingly hot within a few days. This heat is the energy released by the microbes working in the bin.

Many compost bins never heat up noticeably, but that doesn't mean that they aren't working. It may just be that you never add enough material at one go to generate enough heat.

A hot bin can produce compost in as little as 12 weeks, if you turn the content now and again.

A cool bin can take 6 -12 months, but the compost will be just as good.

Compost know how - chopping and shredding to speed things up

Bulky and tougher items will rot more quickly if they are chopped or shredded first.

You can use:

Secateurs - for small bits of woody stuff.

Sharp spade - for green stems, veg plants and so on. Spread the material out on the lawn and chop it with a sharp downward thrust of the spade. Mind your toes!

Lawn mower - for autumn leaves. Run the mower over leaves on the lawn and collect up in the grass box.

Leaf blower - some powered leaf collectors will also shred the leaves.

Shredders - electric and petrol driven shredders are available. A shredder will reduce a pile of woody prunings to a heap of useful 'chips'. These can then be put in your compost bin, or composted separately to use as a mulch on shrubs and other established plants.

Shredding tips:

- Buy or hire a shredder.
- Get the biggest you can afford. More powerful shredders are more efficient and often easier to use.
- Always wear protective goggles and gloves.
- Shred outdoors or in a well ventilated area.
- Wear a dust mask when shredding poisonous plants such as laurel.

Compost know how - mixing and turning

- 'Turning' a compost heap simply means emptying everything out of the bin, mixing it all up and putting it back again.
- Turning the material isn't essential, but you can get better compost if you turn the contents of the bin every few months.
- Turning the compost gives you a chance to adjust the mixture if the ingredients are too wet or too dry.
- Turning also incorporates more air into the heap, which can speed up the process.
- Special trowels are available allowing some mixing of material without emptying the bin.

When is the compost ready?

Compost is ready to use when it is dark brown/black in colour and you can't see any sign of what went into it - apart from eggshells, corn cobs or twigs which are very slow to rot.

Your finished compost may be fine and crumbly, like a rich soil. Or it might be lumpy, sticky or wet (or all three!). Don't worry if it doesn't look like compost bought from the garden centre. This is likely to have been sieved to make it look good. Yours will work just as well.

Getting the compost out

After six months or so there should be some finished compost at the bottom of the bin. To check, open the side hatch if your bin has one, or lift the bin away from its content.

If you have a hatch, you can scoop some compost out through the hatch. If you want more it may be easier to lift the bin itself off the heap.

Take off the uncomposted top layers of the heap and set them to one side. Remove the compost at the bottom and then replace the uncomposted material back in the bin.

Continue to add compost material as before.

Tips for using the compost

- Once the compost is ready, you can use it almost anywhere on the garden; as a mulch in the borders, as a soil improver in the vegetable plot or in the annual beds. It's best not to store the compost for too long as its value may decline over time.
- Spread compost over the surface of the soil as mulch, or dig it in to the top few inches of soil. Don't bury it deeper than about 20cm.
- Apply compost in spring and summer. Use it around growing plants, or where you are going to plant something soon.

- Use about 1-2 wheelbarrow loads (approx 100 litres) per 5m². This is a layer approximately 1.5 cm deep. You can use more on poor soils.
- If the compost is a bit lumpy, sieve it before using it in seed and potting mixes, or spreading it over the lawn.
- If your supplies of compost are limited, use it on plants that benefit from extra feeding.
- Add a top dressing of compost to tubs and containers in the spring and summer.
- Don't worry if there are still a few twigs and sticks or bits of eggshell in the compost – it will still be fine to use.

Questions

Do I need more than one compost bin?

If you haven't a lot of stuff to compost, then you can probably manage with one bin. Every 6 months or so remove the lower layers of finished compost, and put the unrotted material back into the bin to carry on composting. Many people like to have two bins. That way one can be filled whilst the other is left for the compost to become ready.

Do I need to mix the heap?

You can make perfectly good compost without mixing or turning the heap, especially if you have mixed up the various types of material before adding them to the bin. If your compost tends to be rather too dry or too wet (or you are not sure how it is going), mixing the contents of the bin now and again gives you the opportunity to adjust the balance of materials. It can also speed up the process if the heap was short of air. Simply lift the bin off the heap.

Mix everything up - adding extra material to make it wetter or drier if required - then put it all back into the bin.

How do I get rid of the ants in my heap?

Ants are just one of the many types of creature involved in the composting process - so there is generally no need to try and get rid of them. If they are stinging ants which are annoying you, mixing the contents of the bin regularly may get rid of them. The presence of ants can also indicate that the heap is too dry. If this is the case, mix in wetter materials or water the heap.

Why isn't my compost composting?

If you are new to composting, you may just be being a little impatient. Composting does take time and the process slows down in cold weather. It will also be slower if the heap is too dry, or the contents are all rather tough. Adjust the moisture level, and speed up the process, by mixing in grass mowings and other materials that are quick to rot. Chop up chunky items.

Can I make compost in just a few months?

To make compost quickly you need to fill a compost bin completely at one go, using a good mixture of materials (chopped up or shredded if chunky). The contents of the bin will get hot in a few days, speeding up the process. When it has cooled down, re mix the heap. Repeat until heating stops.

Do I need to buy a compost activator?

A compost activator is simply something that gets the composting process started. Grass mowings, nettles or comfrey leaves will work as well as any activator that you could buy. People who don't have access to natural activators, may find the ones you can buy useful.

Can I put autumn leaves on my compost heap?

Autumn leaves are a useful 'Brown' material, to balance out too much wet stuff in a heap. Store some dry in the autumn to use over the following months. Large quantities of autumn leaves will slow down a compost heap – so they are better kept separate. Simply stuff them, wet, into black plastic sacks (or into a simple wire mesh container) and leave them to rot for a year. They turn into 'leafmould' which is a good soil conditioner and potting compost ingredient.

What can I do with all my lawn mowings?

Lawn mowings can be composted if you have plenty of 'Browns' such as cardboard and autumn leaves to balance the mixture. If you still have too many mowings for the compost heap, just leave them on the lawn in summer. They will soon disappear back into the grass. Grass mowings can also be put on the soil as a mulch around your garden plants.

How can I prevent rats getting into my compost heap?

Signs of rats are generally only seen in a compost heap if they are already in the area. If you live close to fields, livestock or have a stream close to your house the chance of rats being around is higher – but they are increasingly common these days.

Don't put meat, fish or cooked food scraps in your compost bin. It is impossible to make your compost bin 100% rat proof, although you can deter rats by lining the base, sides and top of the bin with a heavy-duty metal mesh. The mesh holes should be less than 1.5cm in diameter. Chicken wire is not suitable. The most effective mesh is the type used by builders to strengthen concrete. The compost bin should also have a tightly fitting lid that can be clamped on. Rats are shy creatures and prefer to be undisturbed. Regular use of the compost is likely to cause too much disruption for a rat colony to develop.

I have seen slugs in my compost heap. Will they harm my garden?

Slugs are a useful part of the composting process and will stay feeding in the bin. When you finally spread the finished compost any slug eggs that might be present are likely to dry out before they can hatch. A compost bin will also harbour other creatures that eat slugs - so keep composting.

Can I put weeds in my compost heap?

Annual weeds are fine to compost. If they have gone to seed they will still compost well, though you are likely to get some seedling weeds growing in the compost when you apply it to the garden. These can easily be hoed off, or you can dig the compost into the soil. Persistent perennial weeds that spread easily, such as celandine, ground elder, couch grass and bindweed are best kept separate. Put them in a black plastic sack with some grass mowings and leave them in the sun to rot for six months or more. Once all signs of the roots have disappeared, add the sludge to your compost heap. Alternatively take

perennial weeds to your local green waste collection site. Large-scale commercial compost heaps heat up to temperatures that will kill them off.

Is compost safe to handle?

Yes – as long you take the usual hygiene precautions. Keep any cuts covered, or wear gloves when handling compost. Wash hands well after handling any compost. Keep your anti-tetanus jabs up to date if you are gardening.

Can I compost orange peel?

Yes. There seems to be a common misconception that citrus peel shouldn't be added to a compost heap. It will compost, mixed with other ingredients.

Does a compost heap breed pests?

When you open the lid of your compost bin, you may notice all sorts of little creatures in the compost. These will simply be getting on with the composting and will not fly out to attack your garden plants.

How can I get rid of the tiny black flies that appear in a cloud when I open the lid of my compost bin?

These are fruit flies and are harmless. They tend to appear in warm weather, especially when there is lots of kitchen waste on the compost heap. Try to cover kitchen waste with a layer of something else when you add it to the bin. If you keep the lid of the bin ajar the flies will not build up in such numbers.

Do I need a shredder?

Tough and chunky items will compost much more quickly if chopped or shredded. A powered shredder is great if you have lots of woody prunings and evergreen hedge clippings to deal with. Small home shredders are often not powerful enough to be efficient – so it can be more cost effective to hire a shredder now and again.

Can I use my homemade compost to sow seeds in and pot up my plants?

You can use compost as one of the ingredients in a home made seed or potting compost, but on its own it would be too rich. Two year old leafmould makes a good sowing compost on its own.

Can I compost Leyland cypress hedge clippings?

Fresh clippings (whole or shredded) can be used for a mulch on pathways. Otherwise they should be composted before use. As they usually come in large quantities, it is best to make them into a separate heap. Put the prunings through a shredder. Fill a compost heap with the shreddings. Water the material as you fill the container. Add alternate layers of grass mowings, or use a nitrogen rich liquid to

water the prunings. Cover the heap. Within a few days the heap may heat up.

Leave to compost for 3 months or more. By this time the contents of the heap will not have turned into compost, but it should be a dark brown colour.

It can now be used as a mulch on shrubberies and other established plantings.

Can I compost diseased plants?

Don't compost plants with persistent diseases such as white rot, sclerotinia, wilts and clubroot that can survive for many years in the soil. Many diseases only survive on living plants, so they will not survive in a compost heap.