

HOME COMPOSTING

To improve garden soil organic matter such as compost or manure needs to be added regularly.

Farmyard manure is not always easy to come by but all households provide waste that can be easily composted. If you've had a go at making compost in the past but it turned to slime or didn't break down, don't give up – have another go.



Making a heap

Research undertaken by the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) has shown that the bigger the surface area of the compost heap (1 sq. metre was the minimum) the better, and the heap should not be too high. A low wide heap works best. Old pallets screwed together can make ideal compost areas, and if you have room for 2 or 3, all the better.



(When the first bin of compost is ready, it can be moved to a new bin which will enable you to start a fresh bin of waste rather than piling it on top of the bin that's ready.)

Concrete blocks, walls, wire netting stapled to posts, wooden boards can all be used to construct the bins. The heap can be covered with old carpet or under felt, or any semi porous material.

Compost bins are available from recycling centres and although small and tidy, most do not fill the criteria above. However any compost is better than none!

Bins and heaps perform better with a porous lid rather than a solid one - there are fewer flies, as they don't become trapped.

The research also found that worms in the bin love paper that's mixed with grass and kitchen waste and that it's the work they do, rather than the heat, that makes successful compost. Always make the heap directly on the soil otherwise the worms can't get into it. It also works best if it's kept moist. If you're worried about rodents, place some steel mesh at the base to prevent rodents burrowing or chewing their way in.

What to use

The most important thing is to use the correct ratio of Browns (paper, cardboard etc.) to Greens (kitchen and garden waste). Anything from 1:1 to 3:1 works well. This can be all mixed together and doesn't need layering.

- Tissues, paper towels, any crumpled or balled paper, cereal boxes, egg boxes can be used. Torn up and crumpled wet newspaper composts faster than dry.
- Kitchen waste that includes any vegetable peelings, washed egg shells, tea leaves and coffee grinds. Cooked vegetable waste can be used but may attract vermin. Avoid using citrus fruit peelings. Don't use leftover meat or meat products.
- Grass clippings can be added, but no more than 6in deep or it will turn into slime.
- Hedge clippings and all prunings – will compost faster if they are shredded.
- Leaves can be included but consider making a separate leaf bin as they take longer to compost. If you set the lawnmower on its highest setting, the collector bag will pick them all up for you.
- Ash from (untreated) wooden fires – in thin layers only.
- Seaweed and (*vegetarian*) animal manures.

There's no need to use an activator but a sprinkling of lime can help to make the compost less acidic, which will benefit the worms.

Don't use

Pernicious weed roots such as ground elder, couch grass and docks. Although they contain lots of nutrients, the heap will not be hot enough to kill off the seeds. Tie them up in a plastic bag with some grass clippings, leave them for six months and then add them to the heap. Plant material that has disease, insecticides or herbicides, or any plastic, metal or glass should not be added.

So good luck! It will take about a year to produce good compost using this method, and apart from the potential benefits of making your own, you will notice almost immediately that the rubbish you send off to the landfill will be less.

Approximate nutrient contents of compost 'ingredients'

(Source – [Grow Your Own Magazine](#), July 2009 issue):

Ingredient	N%	P%	K%	
Banana skins	0	3	41	
Clover	2	0.5	2	
Coal ash	0	0.4	0.5	
Coffee grinds	2	0.3	0.2	
Conifer needles	0.5	0.1	0.03	
Eggshells	1.2	0.4	0.1	
Feathers	15	0	0	
Grass trimmings	4	0.1	0.3	
Leafy vegetables	3	6	1.1	
Legume pods	0	1.4	9	
Pond dredging's		1.3	0.2	0.2
Potato peelings	0	5	27	

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Poultry manure (fresh)	1	1.5	0.5
Sweet corn stems	0	0	50