

COMPOSTING KNOW-HOW

Tips and advice for more experienced composters

TOPIC 1

How to get the right compost mix

Living microscopic organisms break down the materials we compost by feeding on them. These microbes include bacteria and other very small organisms. In order to live, microbes need food, air, moisture and warmth – just like you and me!

Food:

The key to making good compost is to use a balance of different types of materials. Young, wet, sappy materials, like grass cuttings and vegetable peelings, rot quickly and are known as 'greens'. Greens need to be mixed with tougher, dry items like old bedding plants and cardboard known as 'browns'. Browns add structure to the compost allowing air in and providing the microbes with a balanced diet.

Aim for a 50/50 mix of both wet greens and dry browns. For example, for every caddyful of fruit and vegetable peelings you add, match it with a caddyful of scrunched up paper and cardboard packaging (e.g. egg boxes).

Air:

The microbes that make the best compost need air to live. It is important to allow air into the bin to aid composting. This can be done in a variety of ways:

- Add scrunched up paper, cardboard egg boxes or loo roll tubes to ensure air pockets.
- Stick a fork or broom handle as far into the compost as possible and give it a good wiggle!
- Dig your compost over using a garden fork (if you use a compost bin please make sure you have good access to the material before you do this).

Enough moisture:

If you have the right balance of 'greens' and 'browns' you should have the correct amount of moisture. However, if it is too dry add some more greens, and if it is too wet add some more browns. For a quick fix you can add

moisture with a watering can (See topic 2), or a really easy way is to leave the lid off for a while and let the rain in.

Warmth:

Microbes need warmth to thrive, so siting your bin in partial sun and keeping the compost covered will ensure plenty of warmth.

Half full bins:

If the bin is quite empty lay some flattened cardboard over the top. This will keep heat in. You can keep adding waste on top of it as it will rot down as well.

COMPOSTING

If your compost bin tends to be wet and smelly, add more browns; if it is dry, add some greens.



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TOPIC 2

How to speed up the compost process

Making compost is simple as all the hard work is carried out by nature. As a general rule you will get usable compost after about 6 – 12 months. However, it's not always as fast as one would like it. Here are some tips on how to speed up the composting process.

Add water:

A dry compost bin can slow down the rotting process. Compost should be moist like a wrung out sponge. If necessary, you can add water to the bin gradually using a watering can and mix with a fork or broom handle to ensure there is plenty of air.

- Siting the bin – warmth speeds up the composting process so it's best to site your bin in partial sun.
- Chop up any large items – the smaller the bits the faster they'll rot.
- Get the right mix (See topic 1).

Speedy ingredients:

Green sappy materials that are quick to rot will activate and get a compost bin started by adding more nitrogen to the compost. However, there are certain plants and liquids that can also be added.

- Grass cuttings, comfrey and nettles are very rich in nitrogen. Adding these to the compost bin will speed it up.
- Both human and animal urine is a great source of nitrogen and potassium. It can be diluted and added to a compost bin. However, too much will raise salt levels and discourage worms, so be careful. Manure and bedding from vegetarian pets are also good sources of nitrogen.

Compost heaps:

If you use a compost heap make sure you cover it with old carpet or cardboard to retain the heat.

Compost bins:

There are a variety of bin sizes available – the more you fill your bin the more efficient it will be!



TOPIC 3

How to compost grass cuttings

A beautiful lawn is a great feature in a garden, but it can generate huge amounts of cuttings. This often creates the problem of disposing of them all.

Grass cuttings are rich in nitrogen and can be recycled to do the same job as garden fertilizers. However, too many in a compost bin can play havoc with your compost. Grass cuttings heat up rapidly as they rot, but too many will make a slimy, smelly compost bin (See topic 1).

Here are some composting tips:

- Always mix grass cuttings with tougher more fibrous materials like scrunched up newspaper, cardboard and shredded confidential documents. This balances out the nitrogen levels and provides air pockets that also help.
- Check the moisture levels inside the bin. Compost should be moist like a wrung out sponge. If you add a lot of grass cuttings there is a chance that it could become too wet. If this happens dry it out by adding more dry brown material (See topic 1). If the moisture level becomes too dry, add water to the bin gradually using a watering can and mix with a fork or broom handle to ensure there is plenty of air.
- Give the compost a turn. It is important to add air to the bin to aid composting. This can be done using a garden fork or broom handle (See topic 1). Mix materials that tend to slump and exclude air, like grass cuttings, with more open items such as twigs and scrunched up packaging to add air pockets.

Other uses for grass cuttings:

- Mix the cuttings with autumn leaves and put in a separate container with plenty of holes to make a rich leaf mould (See topic 5 for helpful info on how to make leaf mould). This can also be done by layering thin layers of grass with cardboard sheets between.
- Leave short cuttings on the lawn. They will soon break down and recycle into the soil to feed the grass, reducing the need for buying fertilisers. Make sure any big clumps are broken up first.
- Grass cuttings make a good short-term, moisture-retaining mulch for fruit, vegetables and other plants. Used as a mulch around carrots they can help deter carrot root fly!
- Laying the grass cuttings over old newspapers will control weeds for a few months.

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Ants may be a sign that the compost bin is too dry.

COMPOSTING

Young hedge clippings and leaves are also good.

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TOPIC 4

How to compost weeds and poisonous plants

Extra care needs to be taken when composting weeds and certain poisonous plants. Here are some tips to help you...

Annuals:

You can compost annuals before they go to seed (otherwise the seeds may survive in the compost). These include chickweed and speedwell. If they have gone to seed, treat in the same way as perennials below.

Perennials:

Perennials are more persistent and can re-grow from sections of roots in your compost. These include bindweed, ivy, dandelions, couch grass, thistles and mare's tail. Chop up and put these in a bin liner with no holes, tie a knot in the bag and leave in the sun to get hot and rot down until they go brown and sludgy. Alternatively you can put them in a bucket of water with the lid on. Then add them to the compost bin when they are thoroughly decomposed. Another option is to put them in your green waste bin for kerbside collection if your local council offers this service.

Poisonous plants:

Rhubarb:

Although poisonous when growing, plant leaves such as rhubarb can be composted. The toxins present will break down during the composting process.

Privet, Laurel and Yew:

Large quantities of evergreen clippings take much longer to break down than other compostable items so are best composted separately.

- To speed up the composting process, large or thick prunings are best shredded.
- Heap them up and water well, mixing in some 'green' material such as grass clippings to speed up the composting process.
- Leave the compost bin for 6–12 months, after which the material can be used as a mulch around established trees and shrubs.
- Care should be taken when shredding these materials. They must be shredded outside or in a very well ventilated area.
- Wear gloves and stand upwind whilst shredding.

COMPOSTING TIP

If you want to speed up your composting process, add some soil or finished compost. Young nettles are also an excellent compost accelerator.

TOPIC 5

How to make leaf mould

Rake up all the leaves from your lawn, preferably after it has rained so the leaves are nice and damp. Put your leaves into a black plastic bin liner and tie a knot in the top. Fork the bag to make several air holes. Place the bags in a sheltered spot in your garden and then leave for one year. After a year you can mix the leaf mould into your beds as a soil conditioner.

If you leave the leaf mould for

two years, you can use it as part of a potting mix. Neat home compost is too rich for potting but if you mix one part leaf mould with one part sharp sand and one part home compost, this blend is ideal for planting seeds and young plants.

COMPOSTING TIP

Rake the moss from your lawn, compact it together and use to line hanging baskets. When the basket is over at the end of the year compost the whole lot – it works!