

COMPOSTING

Here are some handy tips for those new to composting

What is Composting?

Composting is the activity of turning organic waste (such as garden waste or food scraps) into a soil-like product we call compost. When this happens in nature it's called 'decomposing' or 'rotting'. When gardeners do it we speed up this rotting process to end up with a soil-like product that is excellent for fertilising plants without using chemicals. Compost also improves soil texture—making it better able to survive dry weather and less likely to wash away in heavy rains. Good compost is often called “black gold”!

Composting takes some work and practice to get right, but the results are worth the effort. It's very important to build a compost pile or compost bin correctly to avoid attracting pests or it becoming smelly. A compost bin that has become a 'rot box' e.g. smelly or slimy— produces the environmentally harmful greenhouse gas methane, and it also doesn't make good compost. But a good composting system will produce 'black gold' within six or so weeks. Finished compost is a dark, crumbly, slightly damp mixture that looks like soil and smells like a forest after rain.

What Can Be Composted?

Almost anything that originally came from the earth can be composted - e.g. food scraps, garden waste, paper-based products—but there are some items that need special treatment. Meat, dairy, onion and citrus products should not go in, or only added in very tiny amounts. It's also important to know that big items need to be chopped up small— if something is too big or too dense (e.g. a pumpkin skin), it will take too long to rot and slowdown (or even stop) the composting process.

Compost Pile or Compost Bin?

A pile of grass clippings and garden prunings seems an easy option, but this won't make compost of any volume or value, in fact is more likely to make a perfect home for weeds and pests and be a fire hazard in summer. Using scrap wood, bricks or wire mesh to build a box is better, but still should not be used for food waste. Unless your compost bin has a lid and a rodent-proof bottom, your valuable food scraps will eventually be found by rodents.



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What type of compost bin?

This depends on the amount of food scraps and garden waste your property produces and how much you wish to invest in cost and physical effort—ask your local garden centre what is the best set-up for you. Homemade bins are a good low cost option but need some care in construction—they need to be rodent-proof but still allow for drainage and easy turning of contents. Very small properties with little or no green waste may be better off with a worm-bin—refer to our Tip Sheet on Worm Bins.

Where do I put my compost bin?

The best place is in the shade, and close to a water source so you can easily add water in the warmer months. Bottomless compost bins should sit on chicken wire on earth and not concrete, this is for drainage and also so worms can find it (and they will!).

What goes in?

For finished compost to be rich in nutrients, and to keep it smelling good, your bin will need these four elements:

Greens : These are the fresh ingredients which provide the element nitrogen to your compost. e.g. food scraps, coffee grounds, fresh garden prunings, fresh grass clippings. Note—do not put weeds in your compost bin, as weed seeds and roots often survive the composting process and will love growing back in your finished compost. For food scraps, chop dense items into pieces 50c in size. Do not put in meat, dairy or pet waste, as it will attract rodents and may introduce harmful bacteria.

Browns : These are dried-up ingredients that help stop smells and absorb excess liquid, plus make the finished compost balanced in nutrients. A full compost bin should contain at least 60% carbon based, or 'brown' materials, e.g. dry leaves or very dried grass, woodchips, twigs or sawdust, napkins, ripped up paper-board, scrunched or shredded paper.

Water : Your compost needs to be damp to break down—too dry and it will stop composting, too wet and it will start to smell bad. Almost all compost will need a little bit of regular water in the hotter months.

Air : Is a very important part of the composting process—too little air will make a compost bin very smelly very quickly. Bins should be turned over or rotated weekly, as this will keep the composting happening throughout the bin. An excellent, low-cost tool to make this easy is a 'spiral aerator', also called a 'compost corkscrew'.

Where do I start?

Start with a pile of 'browns' next to your compost bin. Every time you add some 'greens', add the same volume of 'browns', plus a little water if it is summer. When your bin is full, stop adding ingredients but continue to turn or rotate once a week, checking to see if it is still damp. You will see the contents shrink, and after about 6-8 weeks, you'll end up with 'black gold'! Your local garden centre or the internet has lots more composting tips.

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