

Basic home composting

Contributed by Treacodactyl and Downsizers

One of the easiest ways of reducing the amount of rubbish we throw out is to start composting as much organic waste as possible.

In the UK most, if not all, councils operate schemes where you can buy a plastic compost bin for a reasonable price. These bins may not be the best way for making large amounts of compost but are ideal for beginners and people with restricted space. This article is aimed at absolute beginners with the aim of reducing the amount of waste collected by the council. How does composting work? Many processes are at work breaking down the plant material into compost, including bacteria, fungi, worms, invertebrates etc. The aim is to provide a balance for them to thrive and go about their useful business, in order to rot down organic matter as quickly as possible. The organisms tend to like a balanced moist place with good airy mix of materials. Nitrogen is essential but too much can cause a slimy smelly mess. Woody material helps balance the nitrogen and allows air into the heap, but too much will slow the composting process. Material can be left in a pile on the ground and it will eventually rot down. This will take time and can be messy, especially when animals decide to rake about. Some form of container or bin is generally used and there are many designs for home made bins and many ready made or flatpack products available. One of the easiest products to get hold of and use is the plastic compost bin. Compost bin There are various designs of plastic bins, most resembling a tube narrowing towards the top with some form of lid. The base is open and some have a hatch. They are light but once some material is added they should not blow away. However, when empty they may need to be secured to stop them turning up in your neighbour's garden! Two different ones I have are shown: Siting the compost bin From time to time a compost bin may smell a little, depending on what has been added. It is best to site it somewhere out of the way, but somewhere easy to get to so you remember to put material in it! Occasionally there may be problems with unwanted visitors to a bin. Rats may set up home and if this happens siting the bin on top of some wire mesh still allows useful animals access to the bin without access for rats. Occasional problems from cats or foxes can be prevented by not adding meat or fish. What to put in the compost A good balance should be easy to obtain from the average household. Most garden and kitchen vegetable waste can go in. Remember to not add too much of one thing. For example, if you have a large lawn do not add all the clippings in one big layer. Leave them to one side and add them with other more woody material. Likewise, don't add several buckets of prunings in one layer. Make sure they are cut up into small pieces, the smaller the better - shredded better still - and add them with the grass cuttings or other leafy material. Kitchen waste can be added and usually is a reasonable mix of tough and fleshy bits. If you are throwing out a large object, an unused cabbage or uneaten fruit for example, break it up before adding it to your compost bin. Some people suggest not adding citrus fruit as it can make the compost too acidic but as long as it's a small amount I've not had any problems. I also add egg shells, tea bags and leaves, and coffee grounds. A specially designed kitchen waste bin is very useful. It has a lid and can be kept just outside the back door so you will not have to make daily trips to the main compost bin. Weeds can be added but a few simple tips are worth following. If you don't want weeds spread around the garden try not to let the weeds set seed; not only will the weeds seed when they are being collected but the seeds will probably be viable when the compost has rotted. A large hot heap will kill the seeds and many other organisms, but the necessary temperatures will not be reached in the average bin. Perennial weeds and roots can also survive and take root in a heap. It is best to leave the weeds in the sun to wilt for several days and it may be wise to leave the roots for a few weeks or not add them to the heap at all. If you have too much green, leafy material and not enough woody material to balance it out then shredded paper, cardboard, egg cartons can be added. Some people may prefer not to not add this in case unwanted chemicals are added to the garden. This is a matter for personal choice; if the compost is not used to grow food crops there should be no problems. Another top tip is to ensure all your fruit peel, apple cores etc from your packed lunch are brought home and added to the heap. If you are lucky enough to have chickens, rabbits or other 'farm' animals then their old bedding and droppings can be added to the heap. What to leave out of the compost A large scale commercial compost can reach very high temperatures that will rot the heap in a matter of a few weeks and sterilise the heap. A small compost bin will not reach such temperatures so a little more care needs to be taken. Some weeds are best left out entirely as they pose to great a threat to the garden. Japanese knot weed is one that must not be composted (seek special advice before disposing of this weed). Other weeds that are best either left out or soaked for several weeks in water (the liquid can be used as a fertiliser) so they decompose are: nettle roots, bindweed, horse/marestail, and ground elder. Generally it is best to leave out cooked food, bread, meat and fish as these can attract vermin. Also leave out cat and dog mess and litter as there can be a potential risk to humans from their waste (there may be some ways where this waste can be added but that is beyond the scope of this article). If the compost is to be used to help grow vegetables it's best to avoid composting some material to avoid the spread of disease. Ones to leave out are brassica roots (leaves and chopped stalks are fine, but not the root balls, to avoid club root), if you're growing potatoes or tomatoes then don't compost potato and tomato waste. Compost problems If layers build up in the heap this can slow the composting process. It is always useful to lift off the bin and mix the compost up and place back into the bin. If some of the bottom layers are almost usable then don't mix with the un-rotted material if you think you can use it in a few weeks. I find it easier to have two bins, one filling up and one left to rot down. This may not be required for most people. Be careful of any animals that are good for the garden that may make their home in the compost; slow worms for example often like to live and hunt in the warm conditions of a compost bin. Compost can dry out and this will greatly slow the composing process. Try and keep the mixture moist, but not too wet as this can also slow the process and leave a smelly mess! Don't add too much water and ensure the lid is fitted and this should keep the heap sufficiently dry. If the compost heap has too much carbon material (strawy material or prunings for example) this can slow the process down. If you do not have material high in nitrogen handy such as grass cuttings, comfrey leaves or animal manure then your own urine can be added. As the bins

are covered and if small amounts are used this should not cause any unpleasant smells, but if your garden is overlooked or the bin is too high then it's best to use a container somewhere discreet! To speed up the decomposition process it is good to keep the heat in. This can be a little tricky with compost bins but a few layers of thick polythene on the top on the compost or even an old pillow will keep in some extra heat. Uses for your home made compost One of the first uses for compost is as a garden mulch. This will act as a way of nourishing the garden, keeping in moisture and can help suppress weeds. The compost can still contain many large particles and doesn't need to be completely rotted. With a little bit of space anyone can make usable compost. With a little experience good quality compost can be made and this has many uses, it can even be used to make your own potting compost. Composting is a vast subject and this article is intended as a basic introduction. Hopefully we will produce other articles covering topics such as worm bins, liquid manures, green manures and more advanced composting techniques. Any comments and advice gratefully received in our forums here. Composting Links http://www.hdra.org.uk/organicgardening/gh_comp.htm - Make compost the organic way with the HDRA <http://www.selfsufficientish.com/compost.htm> - Composting tips for the self sufficient 'ish' <http://www.communitycompost.org/> - Community Composting Network - for people who get the bug and want to go a bit further! <http://www.othas.org.uk/dccn/index.html> - Devon Community Composting Network. <http://soil.hostweb.org.uk/> - off topic a bit, - easy to understand info on soil! <http://www.keirg.freeserve.co.uk/diary/tech/compost.htm> - something for allotment holders.