

# Composting Guide

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## 1. How do I start Composting?

The first thing to do when starting out, is to find a place in your garden for your compost bin. It should sit on bare soil to allow adequate drainage, and the best place is in a warm and sheltered spot - but this is not critical. Remember to leave sufficient space around the bin for your wheelbarrow if you use one.

## 2. What can I put in my bin?

Having found a home for your bin, the next stage is to collect materials from your kitchen and garden to put in it. Most organic waste can be composted, including; lawn clippings, leaves, vegetable scraps, tea leaves, fruit peelings, coffee grounds, vacuum dust and crushed eggshells.

Chopping and shredding larger items speeds up the composting. This can easily be done by running the lawn mower over leaves and other soft garden waste. The more uniform in size the ingredients are, the quicker the decomposition process.

## 3. How do I fill my bin?

When filling your bin, you must include a mixture - both tough, fibrous ingredients (browns), to give the end product some body, and soft, sappy materials (greens) to give the bugs the energy to start the composting process. Too many 'browns' and the heap will take years to compost. Too many 'greens' will result in a slimy, smelly heap.

The more you can add to your bin at once, the more likely it is to heat up, which will speed up the process. Gather together a good supply of weeds, lawn mowings, kitchen waste and any other materials that are available over a few days. Mix all of them together and put them in your bin. Don't squash the materials down to make more space - this will use up air which the creatures need. Keep adding material to your bin as and when it becomes available, trying to add as much as possible in one go.

#### **4. How do I look after my bin?**

There are two more ingredients essential to the composting creatures - air and water. Both are incorporated into the bin as it is filled, but it's a good idea to check them every so often.

**AIR** - A heap of mixed ingredients should contain enough air. Woody items keep air spaces open, while the soft, sappy ones, which tend to slump together, make sure that the heap is not so airy that it dries out. If your bin gets very hot, or contains a lot of sappy material, the air may be used up. Therefore, it is a good idea to try to turn the material over every so often, to add more air. This also gives the material at the edges a chance to get hot in the middle of the bin.

**WATER** - It is difficult to say just how much water, if any, needs to be added to your bin. Not enough and the materials won't compost; too much and it will become slimy and smelly. The more sappy material in your bin, the less the need to add water. Very dry ingredients, such as straw or hay, are best soaked well before being added. The best time to add water to your bin is when you turn the material.

#### **5. What do I do when my bin is full?**

It's surprising how much you can fit into compost bins, because the volume of material reduces as it break down into compost, creating more spaces. However, you may reach a point where you can't fit any more into the bin. You may find that some of the material at the bottom of the bin has already composted, so this can be removed and used on the garden. If not, leave the bin for a couple of weeks and you should have more space. If you've got so much material that you fill the bin in 2 or 3 weeks, your best bet is to get a second bin!

#### **6. When is the compost ready?**

Compost can be used when it has turned a dark color and the original ingredients are no longer recognizable. It may be rather stringy or lumpy but this doesn't matter. If a finer product is required, the compost will either need to be left longer, or put through a garden sieve.

Compost can be ready to use in as little as a couple of months, or it may take a year or more. The time taken depends on a whole range of factors including air temperature, the mixture of ingredients, how finely the material was chopped, and how quickly the bin was filled. There are no set rules and whether it takes 3 or 12 months to produce compost, you are still actively helping to improve your garden and the wider environment.

## **7. How do I use my compost?**

Compost can be used on all soils to improve structure - it helps light soils to hold more water and heavy soils to drain more freely. It also provides plant foods.

Digging In - This normally takes place in the autumn after the removal summer crops, although you can dig in throughout the year.

Mulching - If you're not a keen gardener, mulching is a good way to use your compost. Simply spread the material in a thick layer (3-4 inches) on the soil surface, from where it will slowly be taken down into the soil by worms and other creatures. Mulching keeps down annual weeds and helps retain moisture as well as feeding the soil. You can put the compost around growing vegetables, or on soil a few weeks before you plant.

Potting - Your compost can be used as an ingredient of home-made potting compost. Use 7 parts soil to 3 parts compost to 2 parts sand.