



Composting at Home

One of the best things about nature is that everything has a use. Composting is an inexpensive, natural process that transforms your kitchen and garden waste into a valuable and nutrient rich food for your garden.

Save your leftovers and save the planet

Composting at home for just one year can save global warming gases equivalent to all the CO₂ your kettle produces annually, or your washing machine produces in three months.

You may wonder why one would need to home compost when the waste will break down in landfill anyway, especially now most local councils do doorstep food waste collections.

The problem with waste that is sent to landfill, is that air cannot get to the organic waste. Therefore as the waste inevitably does break down it creates a harmful greenhouse gas, methane, which damages the Earth's atmosphere.

When this same waste is composted at home, oxygen helps the waste to decompose aerobically which means hardly any methane is produced, which is good news for the planet.

Garden Gold

Your compost is a nutrient-rich food product for your garden and will help improve soil structure, maintain moisture levels, and keep your soil's pH balance in check while helping to suppress plant disease and weeds. It will have everything your plants need including nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium and it will help buffer soils that are very acidic or alkaline. Compost improves your soil's condition and structure, your plants and flowers will love it! It also helps break down heavy clay soils and improves moisture retention in sandy soils. The very process of composting supports myriad wildlife that are at the bottom of the food chain. The more bugs and crawlies that there are thriving happily whilst merrily breaking down your rubbish, the more food there is for larger creatures such as hedgehogs, voles, wild birds and more.

On a microscopic level there are millions of bacteria and organisms busily manufacturing goodness out of your garbage.

As Easy as Baking a Cake

Many people have compost bins, but only use them for their grass clippings. Just as trying to bake a cake using flour alone does not produce anything resembling cake, grass clippings alone does not lead to successful compost. The best compost, like the best cake, has a large variety of ingredients.

Suitable ingredients include:

- Leaves
- Grass clippings
- Any non-animal food scraps: fruits, vegetables, peelings, bread, cereal, coffee grounds and filters, tea leaves and tea bags (preferably minus the staples)
- Old wine
- Pet bedding from herbivores ONLY — rabbits, hamsters, etc.
- Dry cat or dog food
- Dust from sweeping and vacuuming
- Dryer lint
- Old herbs and spices

Manure can also be added, but it should be organic as worming and flea treatments are pesticides and can kill the very insects that are vital for processing the waste. Carnivorous animal droppings may contain diseases that are harmful as well.



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Other Stuff

All of these items can be added to compost, but if you just toss them into a normal heap, they may still be there, virtually unchanged, a season or two later. Be prepared and turn and chop regularly (not during winter months when creatures may be hibernating in there)

- Shredded newspaper, receipts, paper bags, etc (any non-glossy paper)
- Tissues, paper towels and cotton balls — unless soaked with bacon fat, petrol, makeup, or other stuff that doesn't belong in the pile!
- Cardboard, egg cartons, toilet rolls
- Old string & twine made of natural fabrics
- Pine needles
- Pine cones
- Wood ash
- Old cotton towels and clothing chopped up
- Saw dust
- Wood chips
- Nut shells
- Twigs
- Hair, human or otherwise
- Old, dry pasta
- Nut shells
- Corn cobs
- Pits from mangos, avocados, peaches, plums, etc.
- Toothpicks, wine corks

We add all of these things to our heap, but we also do chop and turn our heap a few times a year.

Avoid

- Raspberry & blackberry brambles
- Coal ash
- Stones and rubble
- Long twigs or big branches (over 1cm diameter)
- Weeds
- Diseased plants

Raspberry and blackberry brambles are spiky and tenacious – they may well take root in your compost heap and colonise it! Some twiggy material is useful in the heap as it helps create air pockets which in turn keeps the heap oxygenated, but larger pieces simply do not break down quickly enough. We do put some weeds in our heap, but definitely not pernicious weeds such as ground elder, bindweed and mare's tail and we avoid putting in weeds that have gone to seed – there is a risk that the seed will then be spread around the garden, and you will find yourself with a forest of unwanted invaders!

Stuff to Swerve

- **Coloured Paper** – Some paper with coloured inks (including newsprint) contain heavy metals or other toxic materials and should not be added to the compost pile.



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- **Diseased Plants** – It takes an efficient composting system and ideal conditions (extreme heat) to destroy many plant diseases. If the disease organisms are not destroyed they can be spread later when the compost is applied. Avoid questionable plant materials.
- **Inorganic Materials** – This stuff won't break down and includes aluminium foil, glass, plastics and metals; this is common sense, and most of us enjoy a council collection for such items. Pressure-treated timber should also be avoided because it's been processed with chemicals that could prove toxic in compost.
- **Meat, Bones, Fish, Fats, Dairy** – The official advice is that such products can "overheat" your compost pile (not to mention make it stinky and attract animals). However, we know a few clients who put absolutely everything from the kitchen into their heaps, as do we at home - everything including meat and bones. Our personal experience has been that the local wildlife takes care of it all. A client who had the tiniest composting system in her courtyard garden had compost that absolutely full of happy worms. And absolutely full of chicken bones. The compost produced after only a year and with no turning at all was like black gold.
- **Pet Droppings** – Dog or cat droppings contain several disease organisms and can make compost toxic to handle.
- **Synthetic Chemicals** – We strongly advise against using any form of chemicals in a garden as they are devastatingly harmful to both the environment and to human health. Certain lawn and garden chemicals (herbicides – pesticides) can withstand the composting process and will remain in the finished compost. Don't put anything recently sprayed in your compost heap.

Quick Composting

Compost decomposes fastest between 120 and 160°F, so anything that will increase the heat will "cook" your compost faster. Here are four tips for fast composting:

1. Chop and shred larger items, which makes it easier for the bacteria to break them down. For example, one easy way is to slice and dice garden waste is to run your lawn mower over leaves and other garden waste. Take scissors to newsprint or cardboard – we add the office shreddings to our composters.
2. Turn, turn, turn. It is terrific exercise and gets you breathing in fresh air. Avoid turning during winter months though, as creatures will crawl in there to hibernate over winter.
3. Give your compost heap a "big meal" versus small snacks. Collect all your organic waste over a couple of days and then add it in one big bunch. The more you add at one time, the more your compost will heat up.
4. If at all possible, position your compost pile so it benefits from the sun. The heat will speed up the process. However our composters are in the darkest, shadiest area of the garden and it is still warm enough to work efficiently.

Reasons Not to Compost – Busted

Having a compost bin will attract rats.

Rats may well forage in composters for food, but the saying of never being more than 6ft away from a rat would be more realistic if it said you were 164ft away, recent research has suggested. Any animal foraging for food in your compost bin is not foraging for food in your kitchen and they are helping to turn the compost for you by rummaging around in it. And this issue is solved if you invest in a compost tumbler.

I don't have anywhere to put one.

If you have even a tiny garden, there is space for a composter. It can be screened with an attractive shrub or trellis, or can be positioned behind a shed or in a space within a border. 'Dalek' composters take up a small footprint and with good management and some effort can be just as efficient as an open composter.