

Composting Basics

By Helen Crabbe, plot 15



Making your own compost on your plot is a great way of recycling all the organic waste that comes off your plot during the growing season.

Feeding the soil is essential to good plot care and you should work your plot in such a way sustain or improve its fertility and soil structure. The vitality of any soil depends on healthy soil organisms which release nutrients needed for

plant growth by breaking down the organic matter in the soil (humus). Adding bulky organic material such as compost and manure to your soil increases the humus levels, thus providing food for the soil organisms and contributing to improved soil structure and fertility. Organic matter needs to be added regularly to your soil as it is constantly being broken down and the released nutrients used up by growing crops. Thus the compost heap is the powerhouse of your plot fuelling the fertility of your soil and the growth of your crops.

Compost making is not difficult nor does it have to be complicated – just follow a few simple rules and away you go turning your plot waste into something special!

Five simple rules to compost making:

Rule 1 – Add plenty of organic matter. The soil organisms that are going to make your compost for you need plenty of food to work on. A wide range of plot waste can be composted including weeds. Tough woody material will not rot quickly enough and thus should be avoided. Kitchen waste (NOT cooked items or animal produce) may also be used in moderation.

Rule 2 – Get the balance right. In order for the soils organisms to thrive they need a diet that is about 30 parts carbon containing organic matter to 1 part nitrogen containing organic matter so you need to make sure you have the right mix of carbon and nitrogen containing material in your heap (see ingredients box). Too much carbon and your heap will remain “cold” and decomposition will be very slow (possibly years), too much nitrogen and the heat from the decomposition process will be rapidly lost and you will be left with a slimy mess.

Green (Nitrogen)

Weeds (be careful – let roots of perennial weeds like dandelion, couch grass etc. dry out thoroughly before adding to the heap)

Plant waste from the plot (NOT diseased)

Kitchen waste (nothing cooked or animal origin)

Fresh manure

Human urine – makes a brilliant compost activator

Tea leaves and coffee grounds

Egg shells – these don't decompose but help stop the heap becoming too acidic for the soil organisms.

Wood ash

Hair from pets etc.

Small twiggy material

Browns (carbon)

Cardboard – be careful about using anything coloured. Toilet roll and kitchen roll tubes are ideal

Newspaper – do not use glossy magazines as the colouring process can leave toxic residues.

Shredded paper

Dead leaves – these could be composted separately to give leaf mould

Straw – use small amount only

Sawdust – use small amounts only

Fresh wood chippings or shavings – small amounts only

Rule 3 – A good air flow. The soil organisms need oxygen in order to do their job so making sure there is a good air flow through your compost is essential. Too little air in the heap means that nothing will decompose and the heap will become foul smelling. Too much air means that the heap will cool and dry out. Put twiggy branches at the bottom when you are building your heap and turn your heap once or twice during its rotting process.

Rule 4 – Sufficient moisture. The soil organisms need enough moisture to live and carry out their activities. If you are adding fresh organic when you build your heap then it is unlikely that you will need add any moisture. However if you build your heap from a lot of dried ingredients then you will have to add water.

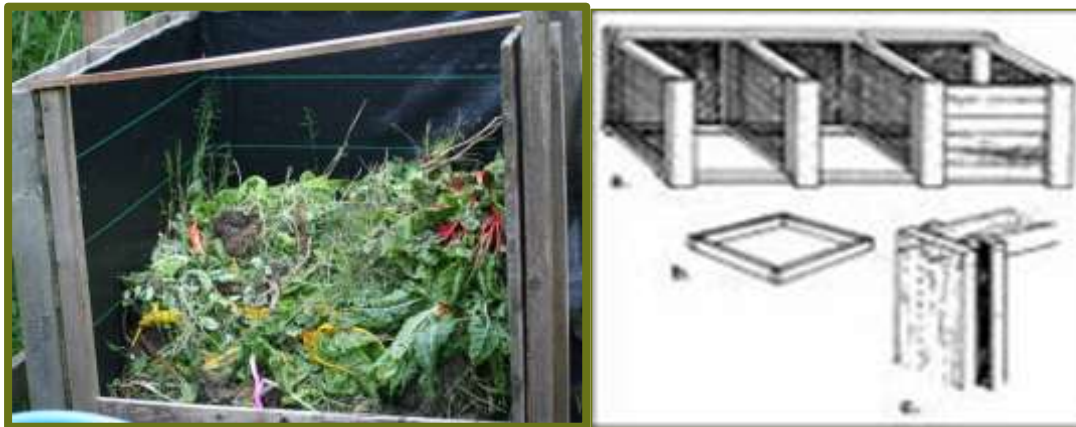
Rule 5 – Size. Yes it does matter! The size of the material you put on your heap will affect how quickly everything rots down – the smaller the pieces, the quicker you get your compost. Also, the size of you heap is important – it should be as large as is practicable for your plot. The layers in the heap act as

heat insulators, so the more layers you have in the heap leads to more heat which leads to more rapidly produced compost.

Compost Containers

Your compost container is important both to the tidiness of your plot and to hold the heat making the difference between compost and a rubbish heap.

The whole process of composting is made easier if you have at least two composting containers or bays, one to hold the compost heap and an empty one to turn it into. An extra container is useful to hold the material you are collecting for your next heap.



Plot 15 – Storage heap for material to make a new compost heap. This is a composting bay, typical on most allotment sites where you have a large amount of waste. These also make turning and moving your compost much easier.

Your Compost Heap

It is better to build a heap in one go rather than continually adding to it throughout the year. This way you will get the right mix of ingredients to give you beautiful compost. Start with a good layer of twiggy material (8-10”) then build up the layers using a wide variety of ingredients from the Green and Brown lists until your compost container is full. Experiment – find out what works for you.

Composting happens faster if your heap is covered and turning your heap regularly (every few weeks) is a must for faster composting, but do try and turn it at least once. The compost can take anything from 6 weeks to a year, depending on how you look after your heap, before it is ready to use. By this time your heap will have reduced in size considerably and the material in it will be dark and crumbly with a lovely sweet earthy smell.