

HOME OR COMMUNITY GARDEN COMPOSTING

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If you are new to composting, or just want to improve your existing compost heap, here are some top tips and resources that will help you get on top of your compost.



1. BUY OR BUILD? • SOURCING A DECENT COMPOST BIN

An easy way to build a heap is out of four wooden pallets and four fencing stakes. These can be recycled ones – they don't need to reach right to the top of the pallet, they are just to anchor it and prevent lateral movement.

If you don't fancy building a compost heap out of pallets, try a plastic compost bin. They're compact, so they're perfect for smaller gardens and yards. Some councils will supply these, otherwise they cost about £20.

2. PICK THE PERFECT • SPOT FOR YOUR COMPOST HEAP OR BIN

It's best to site it on a level, well-drained spot, which will ensure that any excess water drains away easily. This also helps worms to get in and get on with the job of breaking down the content.

If it is getting the sun then this will speed up the composting process, particularly for the black plastic bins. If you are blessed with a shady spot under a tree where nothing else will grow then the compost will do well there too, and you will benefit from a bit of shelter when turning the heap as well.

3. LET THE WORMS DO THE HARD WORK

Nature has provided us with the perfect waste disposal unit in the humble worm. They can live their whole lives in the dark and love the moist atmosphere of a wormery or compost heap, eating the waste material you put in and converting it into liquid feed and compost. The brilliant tiger worm (*Eisenia fetida*) is the most efficient little worm we know, and loves nothing more than eating its way through organic waste.

These are available from fishing shops locally, and from [Leansmount worms](#), based in Lurgan.

You could also go the whole hog and buy a wormery, especially good for those without large amounts of garden waste, but who wish to compost their food waste. [The Wormworks](#) are a Belfast based company producing heavy duty plastic wormeries, and supplying worms.

4. PUT THE RIGHT STUFF IN!

Good things to compost include vegetable peelings, fruit waste, tea leaves (not tea bags, as most contain plastic), coffee grounds, plant prunings and grass cuttings. These are fast to break down and provide important nitrogen as well as moisture.

It's also good to include things such as cardboard egg boxes, crunched up paper and fallen leaves. These are slower to rot but provide vital fibre and carbon and also allow important air pockets to form in the mixture. Crushed eggshells can be included to add useful minerals.



5. DON'T PUT THE WRONG STUFF IN!

Certain things should never be placed in your bin. No meat or dairy products unless you've opted for a digester. No diseased plants, and definitely no dog poo or cat litter, or babies' nappies.

Putting any of these in your compost will lead to unwanted pests and smells. Also avoid composting the roots of perennial weeds (such as dandelions and thistle – though the leaves are okay) or weeds with seed heads. Remember that plastics, glass and metals are not suitable for composting and should be recycled separately.

6. EVEN TOUGH WEEDS ARE USEFUL!

Make a perennial weed soaker – an old dustbin with lid is ideal. Just put your nettles, dock roots, bindweed horsetail roots etc in here, with enough water to just cover them. They will rot down over a 3 to 6 month period in here. Yes, it gets smelly! But you can use the liquid, diluted 10:1 to boost the growth of your plants – it contains valuable trace elements and deep soil minerals your plants need.

Bringing these minerals to the surface in an absorbable form is part of these plants' role in the ecosystem – which is why they are sometimes called Nutrient Miners. You can put the spent plants onto your compost heap a bit at a time too when you empty your bin, they will not regrow, so nothing is wasted.

7. GET THE BALANCE RIGHT

The key to good compost lies in getting the mix right. You need to keep your 'greens' and 'browns' properly balanced. If your compost is too wet, add more 'browns'. If it's too dry, add some 'greens'. Making sure there is enough air in the mixture is also important. Adding scrunched up bits of cardboard is a simple way to create air pockets that will help keep your compost healthy. Air can also be added by mixing the contents.



8. GIVE IT A GOOD AIRING!

A well-cared-for compost heap requires regular turning, which can be a tricky job without the right tools. A good 3 or 4 tined manure fork will do a good job, or failing that a garden fork. Turning your compost helps to aerate and mix up the waste and cuttings, which leads to faster composting, and a higher quality product.

9. BOOST TO THE SYSTEM

You can encourage the correct enzymes in your compost by using a compost activator. It helps to turn your grass, leaves and garden waste into dark, rich, crumbly compost in less than half the time. You mix a small amount into water, pour it onto your compost and after 10 weeks of rotting your compost is ready to use. It can also be used to revive partially composted or dead heaps.

Comfrey is a good activator, both leaves and stem, as are yarrow and tansy. You can even use the famous Household Liquid Activator, or HLA – basically pee diluted 1:4 and poured over a heap that is too dry. The nitrogen encourages the bacteria in the heap to get to work, the pee itself is sterile.

10. TURN FALLEN LEAVES INTO COMPOST TOO

In autumn you can use fallen leaves as a good source of compost, though it's best to rake them up and run the mower over them first. This breaks them down to a point at which it becomes easier for fungi to penetrate the leaves and start the process of decomposition. It's fine to add a small quantity of these to your compost bin but if you have large amounts of leaves, it's better to place them in a large biodegradable leaf bag or leaf moulder – four posts and chicken wire is all you need – as letting all the weather at the leaves is the best thing for them. This is cold fungal decomposition, not hot bacterial rotting.

Once you've gathered up your fallen leaves they can be left to turn into a brilliant source of moisture-rich soil improver that's great to use for potting mixes as an alternative to peat. The leaves will be kept neatly in one place and the sack will biodegrade, leaving you with a rich pile of wonderful compost.



11. GETTING THE BEST OUT OF YOUR COMPOST

When your compost is ready, you'll have a dark brown, almost black soil-like layer at the bottom of your bin. It should have a spongy texture and will be rich in nutrients and biological life.

Spreading the finished compost into your flowerbeds and veg plots greatly improves soil quality by helping it retain moisture and suppressing weeds. It is a huge source of, and home for biological soil life – fungi, bacteria, arthropods and amoebas etc, and helps your soil regenerate into a healthy living matrix, which has no need for expensive and environmentally destructive chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

The less-finished stuff at the top of your bin can be riddled out through a shopping trolley / plastic veg crate or a large garden sieve, with any bits that aren't finished returned to the bin to start off the next heap. Never empty the bin completely – it takes longer for the microorganisms to repopulate the new material if you do.

12. BE A CARBON HERO!

Earth's soils store vastly more carbon than is held in our vegetation cover. The Earth's soils contain about 2,500 gigatons of carbon—that's more than three times the amount of carbon in the atmosphere and four times the amount stored in all living plants and animals. Biologically healthy soils can sequester much more carbon than dry dusty ones.

By composting your waste and returning it to the soil to play its part, you are playing your own part in the fight against the climate crisis.

Further Resources:

Garden Organic (formerly HDRA) have a great page on composting with videos and FAQs.

The Royal Horticultural Society have a lot of detailed studies carried out over the years, as well as how-to guides and clips.

The Gardening Know-How site has a really wide-ranging guide to composting, not in obsessive detail, but it should answer the majority of questions you may have.

Good Luck!

www.farmgarden.org.uk



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