

Making Compost

How to make free compost from vegetable scraps and garden cuttings

Making your own garden compost is great fun and easy to do. It will save you money, improve your soil, produce stronger, healthier plants and help save our environment. Compost heaps also make excellent homes for wildlife.

Simply by recycling uncooked kitchen scraps and garden clippings you will help to reduce the amount of countryside used for landfill, reduce pollution, help protect endangered species-rich peat-bog and reduce the amount of water required in the garden.

This fact sheet aims to show how to start composting, what bin to choose, what materials to add and what to do with your end results.

The Ideal Compost Bin

There is no ideal compost bin. A simple heap, covered with old carpet or plastic is just as effective as a 'bin'. The advantage of a container is that they often look tidier and can be easier to manage.

A bin can be purchased or made from recycled pieces of timber (*see over for details*), which will save you money, but if buying a plastic bin or water butt, ensure it is made from recycled materials.

Your bin can have solid sides or have gaps, which will benefit wildlife as most creatures will be able to get in and out. One slight disadvantage with open sides is the compost can dry out around the edges. This can be overcome by turning the heap regularly and adding water if it feels dry.



If choosing a plastic bin, pick one made from recycled materials



Whatever bin you choose, it must have a rainproof lid, that does not blow away and a large top opening that enables you to turn the compost with a fork.

Compost bins do not have a base so excess liquid can drain away. Some bins have a removable front or 'chute' at the base to allow you to extract rotten compost from the bottom of the heap. Check this is big enough to get a spade easily in and out. If there is no opening, ensure the bin is light enough for you to lift it completely off, but not so light it will blow away.

Ideally the bin should be located in a sunny spot to accelerate decomposition. Bins located in the shade will compost more slowly.

Save our wildlife-rich peat bogs with home made and peat-free composts

Making your own compost bin

You will need per section:

2 x 75 cm wooden boards,
7.5 cm wide, 1.5 cm thick.

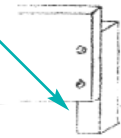
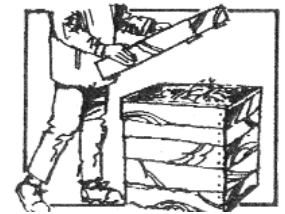
2 x 75 cm wooden boards,
7.5 cm wide, 1.5 cm thick.

4 x 5 cm x 5 cm wooden
blocks, 5.5 cm long.

16 x 3.6 cm screws, size 8.

1 screwdriver, 1 drill,
1 saw.

1. Take one 75 cm board. Drill two holes and screw a corner block to either end. The ends of the board should be flush with the corner blocks, but the corner blocks should overhang the board by 2 cms.
2. Repeat step 1, for the other 75 cm board.
3. Ask someone to hold the two shorter boards 75 cm apart, whilst you attach a longer board to form the third side. Ensure the sides are flush.
4. Turn the section over and fix the fourth side as above, ensuring the section is square.
5. Continue making sections following 1 - 4, until you have a compost bin to your desired height. Attach polythene or an old carpet to the top section to form a lid. Avoid using a wood stain or preservative because it can affect wildlife and the compost.



What to compost?

If it will rot it will compost, but some items are slower than others. Woody items are best shredded or cut into small pieces. For best results use a mix of ingredients.

Quick to rot: Comfrey leaves, Grass cuttings, Young weeds, Poultry manures

Slower to rot: Fruit & veg scraps, Tea bags & Coffee grounds, Straw & Hay, Flowers & Bedding plants, Soft prunings, Perennial weeds

Very slow to rot: Autumn leaves, Thick prunings, Sawdust & cardboard, Paper & egg boxes

DO NOT COMPOST: Cooked food, Coal & coke ash, Meat & fish, Cat litter, Dog faeces, Disposable nappies, Glossy magazines.



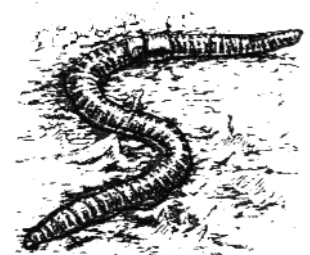
Wildlife in the compost bin

Lots of the composting process is done by small animals, fungi and bacteria, almost invisible to the naked eye, but hedgehogs, slow worms, centipedes and toads will visit a heap to feed on invertebrates. Vegetarian slugs and snails will feast upon the decaying matter along with woodlice, millipedes, earwigs, brandling worms and beetles. Be careful when you are turning your compost, as lots of animals may be enjoying the heat of the compost or feasting on some of the beasties.

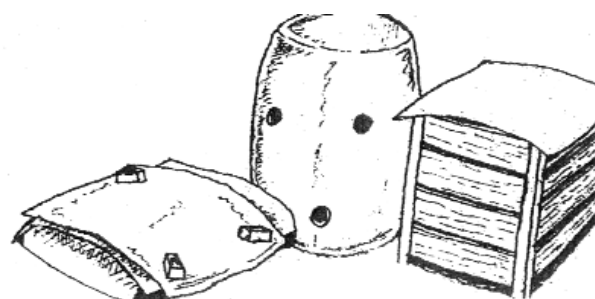
Using the compost

The compost is ready when it looks dark brown and earthy, taking anything from 2 months to over a year. This depends on the material added and the size of the heap. If the heap becomes dry add some water, but if it is too wet, add some woody material to improve air circulation.

Rough compost can be used as a garden mulch or soil improver and is best added in spring. Grass cuttings and leaf mould can also be used as a garden mulch. Fine compost can be used for potting up plants.



Brown, yellow and orange brandling worms emit a foul smell when touched



Wormeries

For information on wormeries, buying and feeding worms, please contact Northumberland Wildlife Trust