

What to use

There is a never ending source of material for your compost available in your own home and garden. Vegetable peelings including lettuce, cabbage and tea leaves, lawn clippings, straw grass-type weeds yet to flower, tree leaves, fruit scraps, food wastes, weathered sawdust, animal droppings, pine needles, spent annual bedding plants – in fact, almost any type of plant or vegetable waste that will break down can be used.

- 1 Straw grass or hay can be added to a compost heap. Grass and hay will introduce seeds though. A hot working compost will however kill them.
- 2 Shredded paper is very much like straw. Add it sparingly with plenty of lawn clippings or fresh garden weeds.
- 3 Leaves are always a great addition, and there's no need for smoky fires!
- 4 If you have open fires or slow combustion stoves for household heating then use the ash in the compost heap. It provides a great source of nutrients particularly potash.

If you are a DIY person then use that heap of sawdust in the compost.

5 Add a little nitrogen fertiliser or plenty of green weeds and lawn clippings.

6 Prunings can be chipped up in the home mulcher instead of burning them. Added to a compost heap they are quickly converted to a rich compost.

7 Don't forget the old spent flowers from bulbs, perennials and annuals. All make great compost when it is prepared properly.

What not to use

Avoid throwing on your compost fat or bones which won't decompose, pest infected fruit unless the compost is very hot, leaves with aromatic oils which prevent decay such as gum leaves, unless they've been shredded, plastic, weeds with small bulbs, anything with pesticide residues or hormones, and any infected or diseased food.

All the help you need



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10/10 handy hints to make the job easier.

Most compost heap failures are due to poor moisture content, so check yours regularly – it should be damp, but not soggy.

Give your heap adequate aeration by turning regularly.

The more shredded the material in your heap, the faster it will work. Consider buying a compost shredding machine, especially if you have large quantities of prunings from trees or shrubs. Or, get together a few like-minded neighbours or friends and hire one for a weekend.

Use the paper from the office shredder, mixed with chicken manure. What better and more permanent way to get rid of those confidential documents but as plant food!



MITREPLAN



Make great garden compost

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Make great garden compost



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PROJECT PLANNER

An easy-to-follow guide to achieving a 10/10 result.

Outlines all the tools you will need for the job.

Including materials checklist.

PLEASE NOTE: Before starting this project or buying any materials, it is well worth your time to read through all steps first to be sure you understand what is required.

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If it breaks down, compost it – with a little help from Mitre 10.

Just like people, plants regularly need food, too. And one of the best and cheapest ways is to give them a good feed of home-made compost.

Basically, compost is nothing more than well rotted organic matter – garden or kitchen waste, manures, soil, even paper. Nearly anything that rots can be recycled through composting and added as a nutritionally rich fertiliser to your garden. You'll also be doing your bit for the environment.

One of the problems of modern life is the increasing amounts of rubbish being generated. Throughout Australia, space to dump this mostly decomposable material is fast running out and laws prohibiting the burning of all kinds of waste make it difficult for individuals and authorities to dispose of it.

So composting your garden and household waste helps to ensure a cleaner world. And compost is easy to make provided a few simple steps are followed.



How compost is made

Many people seem to think there is something mysterious about making good compost. Yet nature has been producing compost since the world began. In nature, accumulated organic material such as leaves, twigs and branches falling onto the forest floor are rotted down by the micro-organisms on them or from the soil beneath. These micro-organisms, mainly bacteria and fungi, are involved in the decomposing (or breaking down) of organic material which is either plant or animal matter no longer living.

The benefits of compost

Compost is the natural ally to the home gardener. It is a cheap and hygienic method of recycling your wastes for use as a soil conditioner or surface mulch to improve plant growth and increase earth worm activity. Compost not only returns nutrients to the soil but it improves soil structure, allows air to move more easily through the soil, and increases the soil's water-holding capacity so that you need to use less of it. The nutrients in compost are also released slowly, reducing the rate of nutrient loss through leaching, while the nutrients supplied by soluble fertilisers are easily washed out.

Step 1 : Choosing how to do it

You have a number of options for preparing your own compost.

The Heap

You may simply stack up the material in a heap in the corner of the garden, which is one of the most common ways, but not really the best. This method tends to take on rather unpleasant smells and encourages mice and flies to breed. If the mix of organic matter is correct, this type of heap can be very successful.

Timber Bins

You may construct a more formal compost bin from wire mesh, old fencing timber, or treated pine to help keep the area a little more organised.

A simple bin design of, 500mm wide x 500mm deep x 1200mm high can be constructed from a frame of 75mm x 50mm treated pine or hardwood with horizontal slats of 75mm x 20mm treated pine screwed to the outside of the frame. Leave the front of the bin open and slide slats inside the bin against the frame. Place the bin on level ground. Once it is full turn the heap out onto the ground to continue composting or better yet construct two and turn from one into the other.

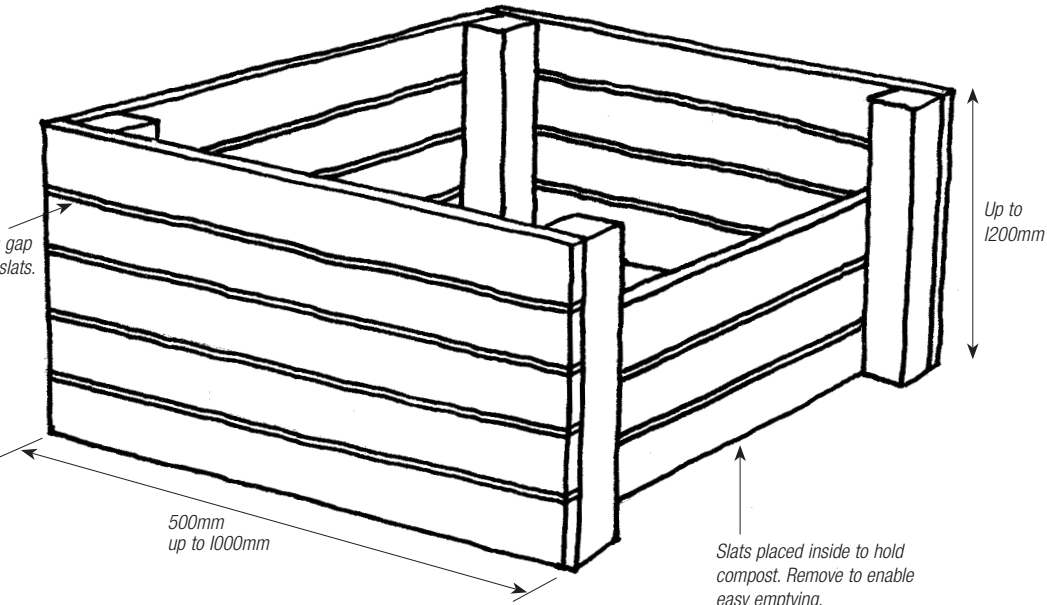
Commercial Products

Compost bins have grown in popularity in recent years and there are many different types and sizes available. Many are made from polyethylene with lids to keep in smells and keep out flies. Some are even mounted on frames with a handle to help turn the compost. These are very clean, but do often lack the necessary air levels for rapid composting. To speed up the process get two bins and after one becomes full turn it into the next bin and start again. This turning encourages aeration and accelerates composting.

A range of worm farms are also available in both plastic and timber. These are small scale compost bins into which you place household food scraps. You can even buy specific types of worms from worm farmers to



Timber compost bin constructed from old fence palings. Neat and tidy yet quite practical and not too difficult to construct.



help with the composting process. The worms soon build up in numbers and do a great job of converting the scraps into compost. They are also one of the best fresh water fishing baits too!

Whichever methods you use for the best compost heaps there are four essential elements:

- Organic matter – food scraps and other vegetable and organic waste. Use a variety of materials
- Micro organisms – supplied by the soil or other additives
- Moisture – contained in the vegetable waste or applied later by hose
- Air – supplied by well ventilated bins or occasionally turning the heap.

Moisture and air are vital. The compost must be kept damp, but not soggy or too wet, so cover in very wet weather. It must not be allowed to dry out, either, or the organisms cannot decompose materials as well or as fast, and you may need to apply water in hot, dry weather.

Plenty of air is also required for rapid decomposition. The micro-organisms needing air are called aerobic and those not requiring it are called anaerobic. If not enough air is getting into the heap, the anaerobic micro-organisms take over, producing foul smells. Avoid this by turning over your heap frequently to allow good air circulation. As the organic materials decompose, fungi and bacteria grow and eat the waste, making the centre of the heap very hot. If the heap is not turned frequently to avoid overheating, the decomposing process will be slowed.

The compost is ready for use when it has stopped producing heat in the centre and should be a dark brown colour with a fairly pleasant, earthy smell and feel like a squeezed out sponge.



Step 2: Making your compost

Compost Heaps

If you're building a compost heap, the Berkeley method, developed by the University of California, Berkeley, is generally recognised as the best method for making high quality compost in around 2-3 weeks. In this method, it is important that the carbon to nitrogen level of the organic material be between 25 to 30 parts carbon to one part nitrogen by weight. Micro-organisms require these two elements to make protein. Some examples of materials and ratios you may use include:

Lawn Clippings, Sawdust	12:1 Carbon:Nitrogen	= 29
Leaves, Sawdust, Cow Manure	2:1:2.5 Carbon:Nitrogen	= 26
Lawn Clippings, Weeds, Leaves	2:3:1 Carbon:Nitrogen	= 28

Locate your heap in an area protected from too much sun or heavy rain to prevent the compost from drying out or becoming water-logged and slowing down the composting process. Dimensions for your heap should be about 1.5 x 1.5 metres and a workplace provided in front for turning the compost. Water each layer until moist as you build. After three or four days, give the compost air by mixing and turning it over, then turn every three days until the compost is ready, usually in 14-21 days. Remember, frequent turning and aeration is the secret of successful composting.

Composting Bins

If using a plastic bin, choose a flat site and fork over the ground before placing the bin over it to encourage worms to enter. Place around 15-20cm of waste in the bin, sprinkle a small handful of lime or dolomite over the surface, then a layer of good soil. Continue adding waste and leave for 10 to 12 weeks, moistening if necessary.

Or you can make your own simple but highly effective bin using wire mesh on three sides to allow good aeration and removable boards at the front for easy access. Place some form of cover on top to protect the compost from very wet weather. In this method, spread alternate layers of garden and household waste in approximately 15-20cm layers and separate by small layers of soil or already decomposed material.

Tumbler bins are also available and guarantee to make compost in 14 days. A few turns of the large revolving drum daily is all that's necessary.

Step 3: Using in the garden

Your freshly made compost can now be used in many ways as a soil improver, for mulching, or in potting mixes. In heavy clay soils it will improve aeration, drainage and make the soil easier to work. In sandy soils, it will conserve moisture and improve nutrient retention. Compost should be applied at a recommended rate of 8kg per square metre. When preparing areas for new plantings, apply to the soil 4-5 weeks before planting. Use it on an ongoing basis in vegetable and flower beds, digging in well. Spread it on the soil surface around herbaceous perennials and shrubs, keeping away from the stems. Mix some mature compost with a layer of semi decomposed compost and use it as mulch. A covering depth of around 10-15cm is ideal and is a good way to keep weeds down, retain moisture and lower the soil temperature in summer.