

COMPOSTING

Almost 40% of your household waste and nearly all your garden refuse can be recycled into garden fertiliser called compost.

This will reduce your need to buy chemical fertilisers, save useful space, improve your garden and help Council keep waste management costs down by cutting the amount of rubbish we collect and bury at tips.

WHAT IS COMPOST?

Compost is partially decomposed organic matter. Good compost provides plants with food and conditions the soil by adding humus. Composting is simply a way of providing the ideal conditions for bacteria, fungi and other micro-organisms to break down organic matter. This means adequate moisture (but not too wet), good aeration and a pH close to neutral.

WHAT CAN BE COMPOSTED?

Almost any plant material can be composted including:

- grass clippings
- leaves, flowers, non-woody prunings
- kitchen scraps, tea leaves, eggshells
- manure
- chipped and shredded prunings.

Fibrous or woody materials do not make good compost. Diseased plants should not be composted, nor should weed bulbs (oxalis and onion weed), toilet waste, animal matter, treated timber products, inorganic matter or the runners of plants like couch, wandering jew and vinica.

Although considerable heat is generated in well made compost, disease organisms and weed seeds may survive, so it's not worth taking the risk with them.

BINS – BUY OR BUILD?

You can buy a compost bin (two bins are better, one for curing, while the other fills) or you can build a simple heap out of scrap material. The secret is to make sure you have provided food for the bacteria (manure or blood and bone) and that the bacteria have enough air (by turning the heap).

Building a Bin

At a minimum you need two bays, one to collect fresh material, the other for the decomposing pile. A cheap way is to get a few sheets of iron and some strong stakes like star pickets or reinforcing bars. Put the bin directly on the soil to allow the worms and soil microbes to get in and for excess water to drain. If Kikuyu grass is a problem it may be easier to put a barrier on the soil (large old car bonnets have proved effective) and introduce the worms yourself. Cover the compost with a hessian sack or piece of carpet.

HOW TO MAKE COMPOST

1. Chop up large pieces

The smaller the material you add, the quicker the decomposition. You can chop large pieces with a spade or if you can afford it, buy a mulcher.

2. Put materials in layers

Mix your materials. Alternate layers of leafy green material or lawn clippings with dry leaves or twiggy matter. The layers should only be about 10 to 15cm thick. Put in a spade or two of soil between layers (to add bacteria) and a few handfuls of blood and bone or some manure every couple of layers (to feed the bacteria).

3. Turn the heap

As the heap decomposes it settles and the air is forced out. It is essential to turn the heap. If you have a plastic bin simply lift it off, put it next to the exposed heap and turn it back in. Add food for the busy bacteria every 15cm or so, a few handfuls of blood and bone or more manure.

If you have a bin with bays simply turn from one bay into the next, again adding more food. If you have a two-bay bin you can heap the nearly decomposed compost against the second bay.

4. Watch the garden grow

The compost can be ready in about eight weeks in summer but can take longer in winter. Put the finished product back onto your garden and watch the plants smile.

WASTE IS A RESOURCE

Attitudes to waste are changing as people realise it can be a resource, rather than a problem. Composting is an obvious example, another is worm farming where your kitchen scraps can be used as worm food to yield valuable worm castings. To find out more on worms and worm farming, including a list of local suppliers, see Council's website.

