

Why compost?

The largest single component of household rubbish is organic material. Approximately 50% is made up of garden and kitchen waste. A lot of this material breaks down naturally and returns nutrients to the soil so it is ideal for making compost. Making your own compost heap speeds up this process under controlled conditions and the finished product can be used as a soil conditioner or surface mulch.

Using rubbish in this way reduces the amount of waste going into landfill dumps. Finding new sites for dumps is becoming a major problem in Ireland. So the more we reduce waste the better. Using home-made compost in your garden also reduces the need to buy peat. This in turn helps protect Ireland's boglands which are rich in animal and plant life.

What cannot be placed on the compost heap?

As a general rule avoid anything which will not decompose for example:

- metal, plastic, glass, chemical products, building waste, textiles, tobacco ash, meat, citrus fruits, branches and roots, magazines, vacuum bags, pet excrement. Avoid using the leaves of horse chestnut, poplar, olive, pine, and conifers - their leaves are too acidic.

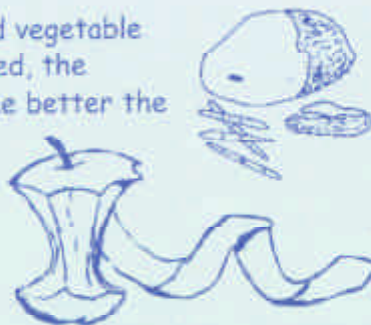


What can be composted?

All types of animal and vegetable waste can be composted, the greater the variety the better the compost.

Kitchen Waste:

coffee grinds, tea leaves, egg shells, fruit and vegetables, left-over cooked foods, stale bread, vegetable peelings.



Garden Waste:

leaves, grass cuttings, dead flowers and plants.

Other items:

wood shavings, animal manure, comfrey (herb), seaweed, cardboard and newspaper ash.



Types of containers

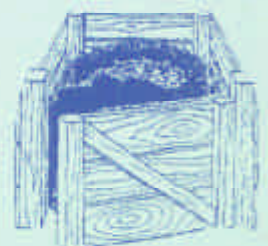
The amount of material that you can collect for your compost heap will help you to decide on the size and style of container to use. Choose a container that you know you will be able to fill, otherwise the composting process won't work.

Plastic bin or 200 Litre drum with holes for air at various levels.



Wire mesh and wooden stakes most suitable for leaf mould.

Wooden strips e.g. fruit boxes, with side air openings, suitable for an open heap in the corner of the garden.



How to make your own compost

Action Step 1

Positioning the container

Once you have decided on a container the next step is to find somewhere suitable to put it.

The container should occupy an area of 1m² by 1m high, have easy access for filling and turning purposes, be protected from the direct sun (to avoid drying out), perhaps shaded by a tree, be protected from winds, perhaps bordered by bushes, be covered in heavy rain to avoid water logging.

Place the container in direct contact with the ground to allow worms and other small organisms to get into the compost and assist in the break down process.

Action Step 2

Filling the container

First layer: Place a coarse mixture, about 20cm deep, in the bottom of the container, use coarse garden cuttings, loose soil, sand etc. This layer is very important for ventilation. Composting occurs in the presence of oxygen so air must be allowed to circulate.

Second layer: This layer should consist of a good mixture of dry leaves and vegetable peelings.

Following layers: Continue to layer kitchen and garden material to fill up the container.

Note: Damp material should be mixed with dry material, thick material should be mixed with thin material.

Note: A compost heap should be turned every few weeks to circulate air and distribute moisture.

Action Step 3

Checking the compost heap

Water is essential, but the compost heap must never become too wet - take a look at the following guidelines:

Sponge rule: Take a handful of compost and squeeze it- the compost should not drip but your hand should be damp.

Wet compost: Allow air to circulate by adding dry material e.g. sawdust, old soil.

Dry compost: Water the heap with water that has been left to stand to expel any chlorine present.

When to use your compost

Non-mature compost takes about 2/3 months to prepare. Use it in the garden to protect soil from wind, erosion, to keep soil humid and to help prevent weeds from growing.

Note: Do not bury it deep as it will continue to decompose.

Mature compost takes about 9 months to prepare and has a dark crumbly appearance that is uniform in texture. Vegetables require great quantities of nutrients, 1-5cm of compost should be mixed into the earth.

Note: Compost must be used within a year or it loses all its qualities.

