A Guide to Garden Composting

FEBRUARY 2014

Christchurch City Council

What is composting?

Composting is a natural process where organic materials such as food and garden waste decompose into rich, soil like material which can be applied to the garden to improve soil health.

Why compost?

- It is an easy way to recycle organic material requiring minimal effort and a little knowledge.
- It is easy to construct a compost heap and the compost can be stored for long periods of time,
- It is a natural plant food, soil conditioner and mulch to enrich the soil, encourage the life of soil and earthworms.

1. Setting up a compost

Find a suitable bin or container to make your compost. It is tidier to have it contained. Construct a bin or bins or alternatively, source one from a retail outlet. They come in plastic and timber units and tumblers.

2. Choose a site

Find a sheltered, level area in the garden that has good drainage and access. The site should be in reach of a garden hose and preferably not in full sun. It should sit directly on the soil.

3. Making the compost

If making compost in a bin, before positioning it, fork over the soil to encourage earthworms into the heap. If using an enclosed container it may be necessary to raise it up on a few bricks.

The Compost Menu

For peak efficiency you need a good balance of these basic four ingredients:

The basic four ingredients =

Greens (refer menu) + **Browns** (refer menu) + **Water** + **Air**

On the Menu:

***Greens** (nitrogen rich)*
- coffee grounds
- fruit scraps
- fur and hair
- lawn clippings
- seaweed
- sheep or horse manure
- soft garden debris/ cuttings
- tea leaves
- vegetable peelings

***Browns** (carbon rich)*
- bark
- cabbage leaves
- cereal boxes
- egg shells
- napkins, paper towels
- paper, straw
- stalks
- tree clippings
- woody material

Off the Menu:

- Cat and dog waste
- Diseased plants
- meat, fish, fats or cooking/salad oils
- Plant material with chemical pesticide and herbicide residue
- Treated/processed timber
- Weeds ie oxalis, twitch, convolvulus, docks and dandelions

Process

- Layer 11-150 mm of coarse material to ensure good drainage and ventilation

- Add a bucket of 'greens'

- Add a bucket of 'browns'

- Add a little water as you make the pile if the materials are dry. Mix, stir and fluff after every few layers.

- Continue to build the compost heap to the required size as materials become available.

Heap or Bin - cover with straw, soil, old sacks or similar materials

Enclosed Compost Bin - fit the lid

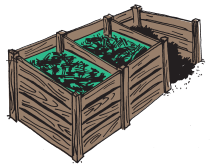
Leave the food and garden waste to compost. In a couple of days the food and garden waste will begin to generate heat and start to shrink. This is the start of the composting process.

The material in the heap/bin should be turned at least once every four to six weeks.

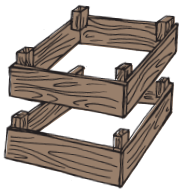
Commercially made composting units are also available.

Netting frame wrapped around wooden stakes and lined with cardboard or newspaper to retain heat.

More demanding units can be made from wood, bricks, or concrete blocks. Again, holes for air and ready access from the front are necessary.



This type of stacking bin has the advantage of being moveable around a section and can be extended to cope with large amounts of material.



Facts

• Turn the heap regularly to allow more air and moisture to be introduced to decompose the organic material faster. This will allow the compost to be ready for use in 4 months. If unturned, the compost may not be ready for up to 12 months.

• Air is essential for odour free composting. Odour is an indication the heap is too wet and there is not enough air present, this means the heap needs to be turned.

• Bacteria are the prime decomposers in a compost heap. They are on every single piece of organic matter. Composting controls the conditions so that material decomposes faster.

• Worms are beneficial to a compost heap. They do not need to be added or purchased, they will come into the heap if it is composting properly.

• When properly maintained it is odourless, vermin and insect free.

• Decomposition is faster in summer than winter, as heat accelerates decomposition.

Advice

• Too many lawn clippings can prevent a heap from composting well. Keep the amount of greens similar to the amount of browns with no more than 2 parts green to 1 part brown.

• A bad odour can be a sign of poor air circulation – turn the compost and add some coarse material like twigs to assist with airflow

• If the compost heap is dry throughout or not composting, turn and wet the heap. Add lawn clippings or other fresh greens and cover.

• A cubic metre or slightly larger is adequate for the bacteria to generate and retain heat in the compost heap.

• If the heap is attracting pests, cover meat and cooked foods with soil, leaves, or keep the heap covered with a lid or piece of carpet.

• Cardboard, paper and napkins are best ripped/chopped into smaller pieces and soaked in water prior to composting.

• Do not add fertilisers or lime to your compost heap as this is harmful to the worms and bacteria.

• Do not add beer or carbonated soft drinks as they will only increase the risk of having ants and flies in the compost heap.

• The compost is ready to be used when it looks like potting mix (dark brown in colour with an earthy smell).

• When the compost is ready to be used, it should be dug into the top 50-100 mm of the soil surface in the garden in either autumn or spring.

• If the compost is coarse, sieve it through chicken netting prior to use. Return the coarse material to the heap for further composting.

For more information

Telephone 941 8999. Email: waste@ccc.govt.nz
Or visit our website: ccc.govt.nz/composting

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