

Composting FAQ

As our climate changes, gardens are becoming even more vital to wildlife and people. They can provide shade, absorb carbon, soak up flood water and help to cool buildings. A well managed network of gardens stretching across the Sussex would also help wildlife to move more freely and adapt to climate change enabling us to create a living landscape.

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Many more of us are taking to composting our kitchen or garden waste now. Below are some frequently asked questions and answers which WildCall hopes will help all composters out there!



Compost bin / Elli Saunders

Do I have to turn the heap?

Only if you are enthusiastic! The materials you put in will compost down on their own but regularly letting more air into the heap by turning it with a garden fork or emptying it out and re-filling it will help it rot quicker.

How can I deal with larger garden waste?

Logs and branches can be stacked into a corner to make a slow degrading log piles, that is a perfect habitat for beetles and other wildlife to live in. Alternatively, a shredder can be used to turn larger useful 'browns' into a more manageable size that will fit in your bin. You could share the cost of hiring a shredder with other composting neighbours.

What about weeds and seeds?

Perennial weed roots and seeds could cause a problem in your bin so keep them in a plastic bag until they begin rotting before adding them to the heap.

What about rats?



Brown rat / Hugh Clark

If you don't compost cooked food, meat, dairy or bread, rats will be discouraged. A bin full of rotting vegetable waste is no more attractive to rats than a vegetable patch in the garden but if you do not regularly turn your heap, rats and mice in the area may decide that it is a warm and comfy place to nest. To discourage this, keep your heap damp and prod it with a garden fork regularly. You can also line the bin with wire mesh and some sturdy plastic bins have a bottom that help to keep them out.

How long does it take to produce compost?

You should expect to be able to spread your compost as mulch around the surface of your plants, shrubs and trees within 6 months. don't worry if it is thicker and doesn't look like commercial compost, it is still a vital source of nutrients and the worms will very soon take it down into the soil. Finer compost may take anything up to two years. Sieving it can separate larger bits that can be returned to the heap for further composting.



How do I empty the compost bin?

Some plastic bins have a door at the bottom that the well-rotted material can be removed through with a fork. If this proves difficult, simply lift off the whole bin and separate the well rotted from the less rotted material, which can be put back into the bin.

My compost bin is smelly! or My compost heap isn't doing anything!

If these are your problems then the balance of your heap is out. If you can manage it, turn the whole heap using a garden fork or muck fork (the latter is much easier), to see whether it might be too dry or too wet in the center. It should be as damp as a wrung out sponge. If it is not, follow these instructions accordingly: Soggy heaps need a boost of fresh air – get the circulation going by mixing it all up, turning the top to the bottom and put in high carbon waste, such as twigs, crunched up cardboard, shredded paper, leaves, straw or shredded woody pruning's as you go. Dry, inactive heaps need some activation - kick start the composting process by mixing in a nitrogen rich liquid like chicken manure pellets or horse manure soaked in a bucket of water. During the summer, net-tles and comfrey are good things to add to a dry heap and diluted urine is excellent if you're feeling ultra self sufficient!

My bin is full of little flies!



Fruit flies play a part in the breaking down process but can be off-putting. Try turning the heap. This will give more oxygen to the micro-organisms and for a few days the overall temperature will increase to an uncomfortable level for the flies. Check you have the right mix and moisture as you turn.

You could also try leaving the lid off for a short time. Birds will be attracted by the swarm and will come to feast on them. As it is the kitchen waste that the flies enjoy, you could cover this layer each time with a 'bio filter'. This can be a layer of old compost, fresh grass cuttings, shredded paper or bedding from herbivorous pets. They won't then be disturbed like lifting the lid would.

My bin is full of ants

People may think that ants are a problem but they are actually a part of a natural decomposition process, chewing up the dead wood and helping to turn the compost over. Of course, if they do become a nuisance, you could try turning the heap or digging out the nest and leaving it on the grass for the birds to peck at.