


Compost

Skill level: 

Time of Year: All year round

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 Sussex would also help wildlife to move more freely and adapt to climate change enabling us to create a living landscape.



Wildlife Friendly: By having your own compost heap you can help reduce the amount of waste going to landfill, digging holes in the ground to create landfill sites will damage or destroy the wildlife habitats that existed there previously. Also, composting reduces our

use of peat-based fertilisers (peat bogs are rare habitats supporting unique plants and animals), and chemical fertilisers which can harm and kill garden wildlife. Compost heaps often provide homes to garden wildlife such as beetles and slow worms.

Climate Friendly: By reducing the buried organic waste in landfill sites which cannot rot properly. Instead of beneficial compost it produces a rather nasty black slime that can pollute water courses if it escapes, and methane a greenhouse gas 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

What is compost?

Compost is made from rotting down garden and kitchen waste, such as dead leaves, grass-cutting, weeds and vegetable peelings. Over time this waste or organic matter is broken down by worms, beetles, bacteria and fungi. Once the compost is formed, all of the nutrients in the waste have been recycled and can be applied to the garden as an organic fertiliser and soil conditioner.

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Why make compost?



- ◆ Compost is a free soil improver and fertiliser, saving you money. It is also totally organic, and reduces the need to purchase artificial fertilisers.
- ◆ Using compost for your gardening saves wildlife. Compost can be used to replace peat-based products. Lowland peat bogs are under threat from commercial peat extraction, and the wildlife these valuable habitats support is being lost.
- ◆ Compost reduces the amount of waste sent to landfills; up to a quarter of household rubbish can be composted. By reducing the amount of waste you produce, you are reducing the amount of money and energy involved in rubbish collection. Landfill also produces methane, one of the greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming.
- ◆ Composting is a smoke-free alternative to burning garden waste, reducing smoke, soot and smells and making your local area more pleasant to live in.

What can you compost?

Compost can be made from a variety of garden and household waste products. It is best to use a mix of different ingredients, but there are some things that you should not use. Here is a brief guide:

- ◆ Grass cuttings, poultry manures, comfrey leaves and young weeds rot quickly and are known as 'activators' starting off the composting process.
- ◆ Older materials take longer to rot, and give the compost body. For example, fruit and vegetable peelings, tea bags, straw, old bedding plants, rabbit and other herbivore pets' bedding.
- ◆ Autumn leaves, tough hedge clippings, woody prunings, wood ash, sawdust and wood shavings (not treated with wood preservative) take a long time to rot. They should be chopped or shredded into small pieces and mixed with 'activators' to ensure rapid composting, although even large pieces will rot eventually.
- ◆ Paper products can be composted, although large amounts of paper products are better off being recycled.
- ◆ It is best to avoid composting cooked food, dairy products, meat and fish, as this will attract rats and flies to your garden. These pests will not be attracted by plant-based compost.
- ◆ Do NOT compost coal and coke ash, cat litter, dog mess, disposable nappies or glossy magazines.

How to compost

Composting is easy! You do not need any special equipment to make it. A simple heap on the ground, preferably about one metre square in size, will compost well.

Most people choose a compost container, as these are tidier and easier to manage and can be built or bought. Any material can be used to make the container, but ideally it will have a lid to keep out the rain, and have easy access for adding, turning and removing the compost. The container should be placed directly on the ground. This aids draining, and also allows worms and insects easy access.

Your compost needs to be kept moist, but not too wet or too dry. If the heap is dry, wet any material you are adding to the heap. If the heap is wet, dry any material before you add it.

Air is essential to allow 'good' micro-organisms to grow in the heap. If there is no air the heap will begin to smell. You can stand your heap on brick, or clay pipes to increase air circulation, but turning the compost regularly will achieve the same effect.

Composting can be completed in as little as six to eight weeks, or as much as a year. In general the more effort you put in, the faster the compost will be produced. Mature compost will be dark brown, crumbly and smells earthy. To get finer compost, you can dry it and pass it through a coarse sieve.

How to use compost

In general, one wheelbarrow full of compost will provide a rich soil for five square metres of ground (6 square yards). You should use compost in spring and summer, when the plants are growing. You can apply the compost in a number of ways, depending on the plants you are growing:

- ◆ To improve the condition of the soil, as well as increasing fertility, you can dig the compost into the top 15 – 20 cm (6 – 8 inches) of soil.
- ◆ To feed established plants, such as herbaceous perennials and soft fruit trees, you can use the compost as surface mulch and apply to the soil surface around the base of the plant. In general, 3–5 years will be often enough for feeding, unless growth is poor.
- ◆ Lawns can be fed by top-dressing with fine compost in the spring or the summer.
- ◆ Roses may need feeding every 1 – 2 years if they are pruned hard every year.
- ◆ Avoid over-feeding annuals, as the more nutrients they get the fewer flowers they produce.
- ◆ Garden compost should only be used for potted plants and seedlings if it is mixed with other ingredients. As a general guide, two parts (by volume) of compost with one part of loam /good soil and one part leaf mould or coir, is a good starting mixture. You may have to experiment to find the best mixtures.