

GARDEN PRACTICE

Perfecting the recipe

Allan Shepherd simplifies domestic composting, encouraging everyone to get started, and gives tips for getting the best results. Photography by Tim Sandall

COMPOSTING IS AS ANCIENT AS recorded language and – as countless civilisations throughout history have found – just as important. A thousand years before Moses received the Ten Commandments, gardeners in Mesopotamia were chiselling instructions about compost onto clay tablets: probably scribing the Mesopotamian equivalent of ‘Thou shalt not compost Japanese knotweed’.

Even early US Presidents Washington, Jefferson and Madison believed the success of their new nation depended on it. Madison went as far as to say, ‘Nothing is more certain than that continual cropping without manure or vegetable manure deprives the soil of its fertility’. Must we compost? Yes we must.

Of course, none of these early scholars knew quite how and why composting was so important, nor how it worked. It has taken modern science to show us this. Thanks in part to the invention of the electron microscope, we now know that successful soil care and composting is dependent on the cultivation of a set of complex relationships between microscopic and

macroscopic organisms such as worms, bacteria and mycorrhizal fungi. We composters do not have to understand how these relationships work, we just have to know how to help them along – and that part is easy. To this end, we need to focus only on one simple technique, called ‘cool composting’.

Cool composting was developed as a reliable, easy alternative to more traditional and time-consuming ‘hot composting’ techniques. Whereas hot composting requires you to collect materials, arrange them in fairly precise proportions and turn them over regularly, a cool composting heap can be started with little material, added to whenever you please – and with as much or as little material as you like. A cool compost heap does not have to be turned.

Choosing a compost bin

Choose either a ‘Dalek’ type (all-in-one, conical plastic) or square-shaped bin according to taste – in terms of success it does not seem to matter. Check with your local authority for special offers on compost bins in your area; you should be able to pick one up for little more than £10. Square-shaped bins are more expensive but you can make one cheaply yourself out of new or recycled cut wood, old pallets, a one-tonne builder’s sack or chicken wire slung around four sturdy posts.

For more about bins, visit the Government-backed website www.recyclenow.com/compost or Garden Organic’s www.homecomposting.org.uk. One of the most attractive square bins I have seen is the coppice crafts compost bin (adapted from www.allotmentforestry.com/fact/rwattle). This uses a weave made from winter prunings of hazel.

Siting your compost heap

Choose an accessible location in sun or partial shade with room around the bin for handling, mixing or chopping materials (this speeds up the composting process). Place your bin on open ground, not on your patio, concrete or paving slabs. This allows composting creatures to pass between the heap and the earth when it is good for them to do so. It also allows liquid from the heap to drain away freely. The exceptions to this rule are free-standing rotary compost bins or wormeries. ► 811



Square-shaped beehive bins are easy to make or buy



MIXING ‘BROWNS’ AND ‘GREENS’

For the best results, be sure to mix roughly one part (by volume) of carbon-rich material with one to two parts nitrogen-rich when filling the compost bin.

brown (carbon-rich) material:

- old straw
- tough vegetable stems
- herbaceous stems
- old bedding plants
- autumn leaves (in small quantities)
- cardboard (scrunch into a ball rather than lay flat)
- shredded paper

green (nitrogen-rich) material:

- vegetable peelings
- fruit scraps
- tea bags/coffee grounds
- grass clippings
- young annual weeds and unwanted plants (see p810 for more about weeds)
- cut flowers
- young nettle leaves before they flower
- comfrey leaves
- rabbit-hutch waste

DO NOT ATTEMPT TO COMPOST:

- meat and fish scraps
- cooked food (including bread and oils)
- dog faeces
- used cat litter
- newspapers, magazines and large cardboard sheets
- glass, metals, plastics and synthetic fibres

Remember to add plenty of carbon-rich material when adding nitrogen-rich grass clippings to prevent the heap becoming soggy

'COOL COMPOSTING': SIMPLE STEPS FOR SUCCESS



U turn if you want to

Cool composting is incredibly simple. The golden rule is to maintain a good ratio of nitrogen- and carbon-rich materials – or 'greens' and 'browns' (see list, p809). If the heap is looking a bit wet and slimy, add more brown material. If it is a little dry and crackly, give it some additional green material. The ideal ratio is two parts green to every one part brown, but you do not need to be too precise about it. You will not need to add any accelerators or proprietary products.

Though you do not have to turn a cool compost heap, it will help to avoid 'slime' and speed up the process by loosening up lumps and introducing air. This can be done with a stick or a garden fork, or you could use an aerator tool (above), which has hinged metal blades at the end of a stout rod; simply plunge it in and pull it out a few times.



What to do with weeds

This slow composting method never reaches the kind of high temperatures that are required to kill off unwanted and persistent plant life, so only put weeds in there when you are sure they will not regenerate in the heap.

- To help them break down faster, you could pile up weed tops and chop them with a lawnmower before adding to the compost. Beware, however, of spreading pieces of roots around the garden.
- Some composting aficionados suggest putting weeds in a plastic bag with a few grass clippings, tying it shut and leaving it for several months until the weeds are no longer recognisable.
- Avoid seeds and the roots of pernicious weeds such as brambles, dandelion, ground elder and bindweed – and remember, above all, 'Thou shalt not compost Japanese knotweed!'



Dealing with woody waste

Woody prunings are slow to decay so you might want to donate them to your local council's green-waste recycling scheme. If you have a spare, out-of-the-way corner, put your clippings in a separate slow compost heap and leave to rot over several years. Alternatively, weave them into a 'dead hedge', to provide food and shelter for a range of wildlife while they are decaying.

- Chip or shred your woody waste, then the chipped or shredded wood (above) can be added to your cool compost heap in small quantities. Larger quantities should be combined with lots of nitrogen-rich material – such as manure from chickens, goats, sheep, cows or horses – and turned in a hot heap.
- Use them for some other garden purpose such as pea sticks, kindling or coppice crafts.



Using compost in your garden

Make potting compost by mixing one part home-made compost with one part topsoil and one part sharp sand (above). To achieve a finer mix, make sure you sieve your compost first. For keeping container plants healthy, topdress with a 5cm (2in) layer of new compost.

- Place around mature plants as a mulch to release nutrients back into the soil; it also helps retain water and prevent weed growth.
- Use as a soil improver. Fork your compost into the top 15cm (6in) of soil in a vegetable plot before planting – one or two wheelbarrow loads for every 5sq m (6sq yd). Spread a 5cm (2in) layer over borders and flower beds and around tree roots.
- To make growing bags, fill strong, empty plastic bags with compost, tape the ends and cut holes about 45cm (18in) apart.
- Do not use for seed compost, which needs to be sterilized.



Home-made compost has a multitude of uses, from potting compost to general-purpose soil improver

Food digesters

The Government recently launched an informal consultation on food waste, which it hopes will lead to a ban on food going to landfill. This will encourage councils to collect food waste separately, compost it or turn it into fuel using anaerobic digestion (a scheme of this kind will soon power 10,000 homes in Selby, North Yorkshire). At the moment you can compost all food waste at home using various domestic green digesters such as Bokashi, Jora or Green Johanna. They have a rodent-proof design and an adjustable ventilation system. You can even buy an insulating jacket to enable year-round composting.

Human beings are the great compost chefs: we take a few basic ingredients, mix them together and create fertility. We can make nature work for us with no ill effect on the environment. In fact, through composting we can have a positive impact on huge numbers of garden species – ranging from the tiniest microscopic organism to the biggest tree.

Gardeners are able to create fertility from materials that would otherwise be carted away into landfill sites. We can put our garden and domestic waste to good use and provide resources that save ourselves money.

The 'cool composting' method is an easy way to compost, but it is only a starting point for increasing garden fertility. Happy composting. ■

Allan Shepherd is the author of *The Little Book of Compost* and *The Organic Garden*

BEST OF THE BINS

Compost bin definitions:

- Beehives: traditional, stacked compost bin with removable wooden 'floors' for easy access.
- Rotary and tumbler composters: plastic or metal cylindrical and barrel-shaped bins for quick hot composting without the effort of hand turning.
- Small kitchen wormeries: plastic, wooden or metal; stacked, box or kitchen bin-shaped worm farms for a high-NPK compost.
- Bokashi bins: small plastic and caddy-shaped kitchen bin with a tap for cooked-food processing.
- Rat-proof cage bins: square, raised off the ground with a hinged wire rat-proof door or lid.
- Chicken-wire bins for making leafmould: wire wrapped around four evenly spaced posts with room for depositing raked-up autumn leaves.
- Insulated bins: concrete blocks with insulation.

Further reading and information

● *The Complete Compost Gardening Guide*, Barbara Pleasant and Deborah L. Martin, Storey Publishing, 2008, £14.99, ISBN 9781580177023.

● *The Centre for Alternative Technology*, Machynlleth, Powys pioneered research into 'cool composting'; it offers equipment, books and courses. 01654 705950; www.cat.org.uk.

@ www.homecomposting.org.uk: Garden Organic's website on composting, which includes the Master Composters' Network and a video guide to 'cool composting'.

● www.smartsoil.co.uk: free-standing rotary bin supplier