

Allotment & Garden Composting



Making and using compost on the Allotment

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Why Make Compost?

Compost makes your allotment grow, it's a rich soil-like material, works wonders around the allotment.

- Lightens heavy soil
- Helps light soils hold more water
- Feeds plants
- Helps control diseases

Compost saves you money by helping cut down on buying garden products

- Soil improvers
- Fertilisers
- Mulches

Compost helps reduce pollution and it contributes towards a cleaner environment.

- Reduces the need for bonfires
- Cuts down on waste going to landfill
- Less need for manufactured and packaged products

What Can I Compost?

Anything that was once living will compost, but some items are best avoided. Meat, dairy and cooked food can attract vermin and should not be home composted.

Some things, like grass cuttings and soft young weeds, rot quickly. They work as 'activators', getting the composting started, but on their own will decay to a smelly mess.

Older and tougher plant material is slower to rot but gives body to the finished compost - and usually makes up the bulk of a compost heap. Woody items decay very slowly; they are best chopped or shredded first, where appropriate.

For best results, use a mixture of types of ingredient. The right balance is something you learn by experience, but a rough guide is to use equal amounts by volume of greens and browns

An example of some of the ingredients you can add to your compost bin:

'Greens' (nitrogen-rich ingredients)	'Browns' (carbon-rich ingredients)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grass cuttings • Young weeds • Nettles (not roots) • Comfrey leaves • Urine (ideally diluted 20:1) • Uncooked fruit and vegetable peelings • Tea bags, leaves and coffee grounds • Soft green prunings • Animal manure from herbivores e.g. cows and horses • Poultry manure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cardboard e.g. cereal packets, toilet roll tubes and egg boxes • Wastepaper and junk mail, including shredded confidential waste • Paper towels & bags • Bedding (hay, straw, shredded paper, wood shavings) from vegetarian pets eg rabbits and guinea pigs • Tough hedge clippings • Woody prunings • Old bedding plants • Straw
Other compostable items	Do NOT compost
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wood ash, in moderation • Hair, nail clippings • Egg shells • Natural fibres, e.g. wool and cotton 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meat, fish, dairy products or cooked food • Coal & coke ash • Cat litter • Dog faeces • Disposable nappies

Compost Containers

Sectional Wooden Bin

Sections are stacked up or removed as required.
Individual sections can be made out of different widths of wood.
Easily moved.



Double Box

A strong static wooden box with removable slatted front.
The second bin can be smaller, to take the reduced volume of material that is turned out of the first bin.



Purchased Bins

Compost tumblers

- A compost tumbler is designed to be turned every day
- This regular mixing and aerating can make compost in three to four weeks.



A typical plastic type compost bin



Making Compost

You can make compost simply by adding compostable items to a compost heap when you feel like it. It will all compost eventually but may take a long time and if the mix is unbalanced, may not produce a very pleasant end product.

With a little extra attention, you could improve things dramatically.

If you want to produce more compost in a short time, and are able to put more effort into it, follow the 'Hot Heap' route.

Cool Heap Route

Step 1:	<p>Try, if possible, to collect enough compost materials to make a layer of at least 30cm (12") or more in the compost bin.</p> <p>Weed the garden, mow the lawn, empty the kitchen bucket!</p> <p>Mix in some straw, woody prunings, scrunched up cardboard packaging e.g. cereal boxes – this helps create air spaces within the heap. It may help if you place a few woody plant stems or small twigs on the bottom first as this will improve the air circulation and drainage.</p>
Step 2:	<p>Continue to fill the container as and when you have ingredients.</p> <p>If most of what you compost is kitchen waste, mix it with egg boxes, toilet roll middles and similar household paper and cardboard products to create a better balance.</p>
Step 3:	<p>When the container is full - which it may never be as the contents will sink as it composts - or when you decide to, stop adding any more.</p> <p>Then either just leave it to finish composting (which could take up to a year) or go to Step 4.</p>
Step 4:	<p>Remove the container from the material, or the material from the container – whichever you find easiest.</p> <p>If the lower layers have composted, use this on the garden. Mix everything else together well. Add water if it is dry or add dry material if it is soggy. Replace in the bin and leave to mature.</p>

Hot Heap Route

Step 1: Gather enough materials to fill your compost container at one go. Bring in manure, scraps from the kitchen, weeds etc to make up the bulk. Make sure you have a mixture of soft and tough materials.

Step 2: Chop up tough items using shears, a sharp spade or shredder.

Step 3: Mix ingredients together as much as possible before adding to the container. In particular, mix items such as grass cuttings that tend to settle and exclude air, with more open items that tend to dry out.

Fill the container as above, watering as you go.

Step 4: Within a few days, the heap is likely to get hot to the touch.

When it begins to cool down or a week or two later, turn the heap.

Remove everything from the container and mix it all up, trying to get the outside to the inside.

Add water if it is dry or dry material if it is soggy.

Replace in the bin.

Step 5: The heap may well heat up again; the new supply of air you have mixed in allows the fast-acting aerobic microbes, i.e. those that need oxygen, to continue with their work.

Step 4 can be repeated several more times if you have the energy, but the heating will be less and less. When it no longer heats up again, leave it undisturbed to finish composting

A Hybrid Route

There's nothing wrong with doing a bit of both. Fill your heap as you create waste (as for the cool method), then turn it when you have time. This will help it heat up. You can turn it as much or as rarely as you please – the more often you turn the heap, the quicker your compost will be ready.

Using Compost On The Allotment

When is the compost ready?

Compost can be made in as little as six to eight weeks, or, more usually, it can take a year or more. In general, the more effort you put in, the quicker you will get compost.

When the ingredients you have put in your container have turned into a dark brown, earthy smelling material, the composting process is complete.

It is then best left for a month or two to 'mature' before it is used. Don't worry if your compost is not fine and crumbly. Even if it is lumpy, sticky or stringy, with bits of twig and eggshell still obvious, it is quite usable. It can be sieved before using if you prefer. Any large bits can be added back into your new compost heap.

How much compost to use

As a rough guide, use one wheelbarrow full of compost per 5m² (6 square yards) of ground. This should be ample for one season, or for a crop that likes a rich soil.

When and how to use compost

Compost should be applied in the spring and summer. It is either dug into the top 15-20cm of soil (no deeper) or applied as surface mulch.

It can be spread over the soil and around established plants. Compost can be used on all soils where feeding and conditioning is required.

Using compost on vegetables

The lion's share of any compost should go to beds growing potatoes, tomatoes, brassicas (and other leafy crops), leeks pumpkins and courgettes. If crop rotation is used, this means that the whole vegetable plot will have received compost over the course of the rotation.

Using compost on fruit

Strawberries

Add compost to the soil before planting

Apples, plums, pears, cherries, redcurrants, gooseberries

Mulch with compost every four to five years or more frequently if growth is poor.

Blackcurrants, raspberries and hybrid berries

Mulch with compost every three years.

Hints and Tips

Autumn Leaves

Store some dry leaves to mix with grass cuttings and other soft green stuff.

Make large quantities into leaf mould (stuff wet leaves into black plastic sacks or wire mesh container and use after a year or two.)

Grass Cuttings

- Mix well with tougher items to avoid a slimy mess.
- Leave on the lawn whenever possible, they will soon disappear and feed the grass.
- Can be mixed into leaf mould or use as soil mulch.

Diseased Plants

Persistent diseases such as white rot or club root are best avoided.

A hot heap, turned several times should deal with everything else.

Diseases that don't need living plants to survive, e.g. grey-mould, mildews, wilts etc. may survive in a cool heap.

Heat is not the only factor that will kill diseases, the intense microbial activity will also help to dispose of them.

Perennial Weeds

Some perennial weeds will be killed in a hot heap. Avoid really persistent horrors such as celandine, bulbous buttercup, ground elder and blind weed. Don't burn these weeds, they are rich in plant foods.

- Mix with grass mowing in a plastic sack.
- Tie it up and leave it for a few months until the weeds are no longer recognisable, then add to the compost heap.

Weed seeds

Weed seeds may survive a cool heap but should be killed in a hot one. If your compost tends to grow weeds, dig it in, rather than spread it on the soil surface.

Hedge Clippings and Prunings

- Chop or shred tough prunings and clippings from evergreen hedges before adding to a mixed compost heap.
- Compost large quantities separately, even unshredded, they will rot eventually.
- Mix with grass or other activating material.

Animal Manures

Straw horse and cattle manure composts well. Keep a sack on hand to bulk up other ingredients.

Manure mixed with wood savings should be let to rot until the shavings are no longer visible.

If dry, water well and mix with grass cuttings, poultry manure or other activating material. When rotted, use as a surface mulch.

Wood shavings incorporated into the soil can lock up soil nitrogen, making it unavailable for plants for a year or more.

Paper Products

Newspaper can be added to a compost heap, but in any quantity, it should go for recycling into more paper.

Cardboard, paper towels and other paper items can be shredded and composted.

Avoid glossy paper and colour print.

Sawdust and Wood Shavings

Sawdust and wood shavings are very slow to decay. Do not use if treated with wood preservative.

- Add in small quantities.
- Balance with 'quick to rot' activating materials.

Quick to rot (Activators)	Slower to rot	Very slow to rot	Other compostable items	Best avoided	Do NOT compost
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfrey leaves • Grass cuttings • Poultry manure • Young weeds • Urine • Uncooked fruit and vegetable peelings • Tea bags, leaves and coffee grounds • Animal manure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fruit and vegetable scraps • Tea and coffee bags • Old straw or hay • Plant remains • Straw manures • Old flowers • Old bedding plants • Young hedge trimmings • Soft prunings • Perennial weeds • Vegetarian pet bedding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autumn leaves • Tough hedge clippings • Woody prunings • Sawdust and wood shavings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wood ash • Cardboard • Paper towels • Bags • Packaging • Cardboard tubes • Egg boxes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meat • Fish 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coal and coke ash • Dog faeces • Glossy magazines • Disposable nappies

Burning of Non-Compostable Materials

It is not illegal to have a bonfire but creating smoke that causes a nuisance is an offence under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, and allowing smoke to drift over nearby roads may also lead to prosecution under the Highways (Amendment) Act 1986 if it endangers traffic.

Remember that smoke from bonfires can be annoying to neighbours, ruining their enjoyment of their gardens, and preventing them from opening windows and hanging out their washing.

The general guidance points below should be followed if you do intend to have a bonfire:

- Keep bonfires to a minimum. Bonfires or burning should be limited to burning diseased plants and dry material that will burn without smoke. *
- The lighting of fires should be restricted to times that will cause minimum nuisance to residents, e.g. an hour before dusk.
- Only have a bonfire if it does not affect neighbours and nearby residents, be aware of wind direction and whether other plot holders on the site have had a fire recently.
- Only burn waste generated on your plot and try to use a device that will contain the fire, for example, an incinerator bin.
- Always have quick burning fires, using dry materials and allow it to burn out whilst you're still present on site. You must not burn green or damp materials or household rubbish that will cause smoke.
- Do not burn household rubbish, tyres, plastic or foam materials or similar as many of these give off toxic fumes and dense smoke.
- Do not burn rubbish from a business on an allotment.
- Do not leave a bonfire unattended.
- **NEVER** allow the bonfire to burn overnight.
- Put the fire out if you receive any complaints.

* Any additional material should be either composted or taken to the Waste Recycling Centre on Long Tens Way, Newton Aycliffe Industrial Estate.



Great Aycliffe Town Council