

What is Organic Composting?

Making compost will help you reduce pollution and cut down that landfill! Your plants will grow healthier and look happier for it and it will save you money on fertilisers too. Our local council in Manchester has now given us brown bins for us to add leaves, grass and other compost matter into, which is then emptied every two weeks once it has reduced to less than half its size.

What is compost?

Garden guides often describe composting as nature's way of recycling.

Composting is indeed a natural way of recycling, harnessing natural processes rather than machinery and man-made chemicals, but it takes people to do it.

Soil maintenance is at the heart of organic growing: don't feed the plants, feed the soil -- the plants will look after themselves. The extremely complex subject of soil maintenance can happily be summed up in one word: composting.

A smelly hole at the far end of the garden filled with putrefying kitchen wastes and flies buzzing round. That's what compost isn't. No stinks, no flies, though kitchen waste is welcome.

Compost is not just decayed organic matter. Composting is applied microbiology at its most complex, involving the interactions of thousands upon thousands of different species of micro organisms in a highly complex ecosystem.

What can I compost?

If it can rot it will compost, but some items are best avoided. Some things, like grass mowings and soft young weeds, rot quickly. They work as activators or hotter rotters, getting the composting started, but on their own will decay to a smelly mess. Recycle your plant-based, kitchen and garden waste by making it into compost.

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.

A container or brown bin is not an absolute necessity as you can make perfectly good compost in a free standing heap as long as it is large enough. You will see later why this may be a drawback. Assuming then that we need to make a container we are faced with many choices.

Why not make or buy a compost bin? They're usually cheap to buy, and are available in wood or recycled plastic (that might otherwise be in your local landfill site). If you're keen you could combine it with a wormery or use a shredder which increases the amount of compostable waste. Do not compost foods such as dairy produce, meat, bread etc as these attract flies and vermin.

How do I know when it's done?

That depends. What was a pile of plant material will gradually, from the bottom up, turn into a pile of dark stuff that looks like brown dirt. Eventually, none of the items you put in there will be recognizable. If you're using it out in the garden, a few small recognizable bits won't hurt - they'll finish composting in the garden. If you're using it for houseplants or to start seeds, it's better to wait until it's well finished so you don't have microbes attacking the fine rootlets of new plants.

Dig it in to have a healthy, fertile garden and your fruit and vegetables can be organic. Don't assume the waste is harmless and bin it. Putting it in landfill costs money and it will produce methane (a global warming gas); also it may pollute the groundwater.

Compost waste often comprises about 20-30% of your total household waste and the impact on recycling is significant.

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