

A Beginner's Guide to Composting

Composting is a simple and easy way to reduce household waste.

By starting a compost system in your backyard, you can create a rich and valuable resource for your garden and divert your kitchen scraps away from landfill.

Knowing a few basics is the key to getting started with composting. Understanding these will mean you're able to grow, manage and maintain your compost with minimal fuss and maximum benefits. Plus, it's a lot of fun!

What do I need?

To get started you need the right tools and the correct ingredients:

TOOLS AND INGREDIENTS:

* A standard plastic compost bin or a homemade compost bin that's made from timber, chicken wire etc.

* A compost turner and garden fork.

'GREEN' ORGANIC INGREDIENTS:

Kitchen fruit and vegetable scraps, egg shells, small amounts of carbohydrates (rice & pasta), coffee grinds, teabags, green cut grass and clippings, flowers, manure (cow, chicken or horse).

'BROWN' ORGANIC INGREDIENTS:

Dried leaves, twigs, soil, straw, newspaper and shredded cardboard.

How do I get started?

Once you have your ingredients, composting is simply a matter of adding them to your bin in the right quantities. It's useful to think of your compost like a lasagne: you need alternating layers of green and brown ingredients to create good compost.

1

THE FIRST STEP is to find the right location for your compost bin. To make it convenient to use, position your bin so that you have easy access to it from your kitchen. It can be placed both in the sun or the shade; the warmer the location, the faster the compost will work.

2

CREATE your first layer with dried leaves and twigs. Place these 'brown ingredients' at the bottom of your compost bin and water thoroughly. This water encourages bacterial growth which allows your compost to start breaking down.

3

YOUR SECOND LAYER should include 'green ingredients'. Add a layer of clippings, plant scraps or other green materials so that it's roughly the same thickness as your first brown layer.





Keeping your compost aerated

Giving your compost access to air is one of the simplest ways to speed up the composting process.

To keep your compost aerated, turn it over or fluff it up every few weeks. You can do this with a garden fork, or a compost turner tool - these can be obtained from most garden and hardware stores.

You can also help your compost stay aerated by using ingredients that allow air to be captured. Materials like dried leaves and shredded newspaper create spaces in your compost that hold in air and fuel micro-organism growth in your bin.

4

FOR YOUR THIRD AND FORTH LAYERS, return again to brown and then green ingredients, including materials such as shredded newspaper or straw and vegie scraps. Add water to moisten.

5

OPTIONALLY you can finish off your foundation by adding a thin layer of soil from your garden to 'seed' the compost in. This 'seed' is about kick-starting your compost by introducing ingredients rich in useful microorganisms.

6

YOU CAN NOW ADD food scraps and other green materials to the bin. Every time you empty your kitchen scrap bucket, be sure to cover with a layer of brown material to build a balanced and productive compost. Your compost is ready when it looks like rich, dark soil. You can tilt the bin and scrape away the finished compost at the bottom, or lift off the bin and start a new pile.





Tips and Tricks

1

Size matters. Just like our human digestive system, your compost will digest and break down foods faster or slower depending on the size of the food. By breaking big ingredients up into smaller pieces, you'll allow your compost to break down faster and quicken the pace of your composting.

2

Make it easy on yourself. Prepare a bucket of different brown material like leaves, twigs or newspaper to store next to your compost bin. Every time you add a new batch of 'green' food scraps from the kitchen, you'll have your 'brown' material directly to hand, so you can add an equivalent quantity.

3

Using a diverse variety of ingredients will produce compost that's rich in nutrients. Depending on what your garden and kitchen are creating, don't hesitate to mix up what kind of green or brown ingredients you add to your compost. Picking up leaves from the park or material from a neighbour is another great way to add diversity to your compost.

NEVER COMPOST

- Plastics
- Metals
- Chemicals
- Weeds
- Diseased plants
- Glossy magazines
- Gum leaves
- Treated pine sawdust

FAQ

For more info about composting, check out [Do Something's FoodWise.com.au](http://DoSomething's FoodWise.com.au)

What ingredients should I limit in my compost?

There are a number of things you should only add to your compost in small amounts. Onions, lemons and acidic ingredients should be added sparingly to new composts, as these can be difficult to break down and affect the pH of your compost. Avoid adding meat and dairy products as these can attract rodents and pests, and dog or cat droppings are not suitable for your compost either.

Why does my compost smell?

A strong smell is a sign that your compost is out of balance. This is often due to a combination of too much moisture and not enough air.

SOLUTION Turn or fluff your compost to make sure it's aerated, then add a layer of dry brown material. Make sure that every time you add kitchen food scraps to your compost, you also add the same amount of 'brown' material. This should keep your compost in balance.

Rodents broke into my compost – what can I do?

Rodents can break into your compost by digging holes underneath the soil.

SOLUTION To safeguard your food scraps and discourage rodents, dig a chicken wire fence into the ground

surrounding your compost. Make sure your lid is fully secured and avoid adding foods such as meat and dairy which are more likely to attract intruders.

Why isn't my compost breaking down?

This can happen if your compost is too dry, too wet or isn't receiving the amount of air it needs.

SOLUTION Every time you add material to your compost, make sure you're giving it equal amounts of green and dry ingredients. If it's too dry (it should produce a drop of liquid when a handful is squeezed), add water until it feels like a moist sponge. If it's too wet, add brown ingredients like newspaper or straw to help absorb moisture. Also be sure to regularly turn your compost to keep it aerated.

Why does my compost have flies?

Vinegar flies, which look similar to fruit flies, are not a problem unless they're bothering you. To reduce numbers, try adding a layer of dry, brown material on top of your compost, or you can cover your top layer with a hessian sack or newspaper. Adding lime to your compost should also help.

