

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?

If it can rot, it will compost, but some items are best avoided. This section gives you some ideas on what and what not to add to your compost heap.

Some things like grass mowings 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.

Woody items decay very slowly; they are best chopped or shredded first where appropriate.

For best results, use a mixture of types of ingredients. The right balance is something you learn by experience.

The table overleaf gives a summary of some items' suitability for composting.

Quick to rot (Activtators)	Slower to rot	Very slow to rot	Other compostable items	Best avoided	Do <u>NOT</u> compost
<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Comfrey leaves  Grass cuttings  Poultry manure  Young weeds 	<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

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 with you feel like it. It will all rot eventually, but may take a long time. You may not produce a very pleasant end product and it may smell.

With a little extra attention (taking the 'Cool Heap' below), 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: Collect together a batch of compost materials.

Try to get enough to make a layer of at least 30cm or more. Weed the allotment, mow the grass, empty the kitchen waste.

Aim for a mix of soft and tough items.

Now continue to step 2 or see Hot Step 2.

Step 2: Start filling the bin.

Spread the ingredients out to the edges and firm down gently. Alternate soft and tough items or mix them together first. Unless items are already wet, water well every 30 – 60 cm.

Step 3: Continue to fill the container.

Items can be added individually but a bigger batch is preferable. If you are only adding kitchen waste, mix it with what is already there, or cover it with torn up newspaper.

Now continue to step 4 or see Hot Step 4 if you feel like turning it.

Step 4: 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, then either leave it to finish composting or go to step 5.

Step 5: Remove the container or everything from the container. If the lower layers have composted, use this on the allotment. Mix everything else together well; add water if it is dry and dry material if it is soggy. Replace in the bin and leave to mature.

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 and water well every 30 – 60 cm.
- 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 times more, but the heating will be less and less. When it no longer heats up again, leave it undisturbed to finish composting.

Using Compost On The Allotment

When Is The Compost Ready?

When the compost is dark brown and has an earthy smell, 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 the compost is not fine and crumbly. It may be lumpy, sticky or stringy, with twigs and eggshell still evident, but it will be quite usable. If you want a finer compost, let it dry then put it through a sieve.

How Much Compost to Use

As a rough guide, use one wheelbarrow full of compost per 5 sq.m. (6 sq.yds) 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 a 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 mowings 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 Mowings

- 🚫 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 blindweed. 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 mowings, 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 shaving is very slow to decay. Do not use if treated with wood preservative.

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