

MAKING COMPOST

For the larger garden a compost heap of 1,5 m by 3 m is ideal. If at all possible, place the heap where it is protected from sun and wind and on firm ground. The sides of the heap may be enclosed with wire mesh or wooden slats but it is important to remember that the enclosure must let through air as the micro-organisms need air in the early stages to break down the plant material. If the enclosure has a centre division it will be so much easier to turn the compost heap when the time comes. Enclosing a compost heap keeps it neater although a lot of gardeners prefer to just put a stout pole at each corner to keep the material together.

A good and simple compost enclosure can be made using second hand wooden pallets. Set them on end and tie the corners with cable ties to form a square. If another "bin" is required just add three more pallets. You will need quite large cable ties to do this. The advantage is that there is a range of larger cable ties that can be undone. Use these for the front panel so that you can swing the panel aside when you want to remove the compost.

For the smaller garden there are compost makers available at garden outlets. These are ideal for gardens in complexes and gardens under 100 square metres.

Place a 15 to 20 cm layer of plant material at the bottom of the heap and sprinkle an activator over it. Animal manures, specially cow, horse and chicken, are good activators. If this is not readily available a commercial activator can be bought at garden outlets or ammonium sulphate at 15 gm per square metre (28 gm for this size heap) can be used. Add super phosphate at the rate of 10 gm per square metre (15 gm for this size heap) and, if available, wood ash. Lightly water the layer and tamp it down to get rid of any air pockets, then cover with a layer of soil about 5 cm thick.

Repeat this process mixing fine and coarse material well. Lawn cuttings especially must be mixed well with coarser material to prevent them forming an airtight layer and, instead of breaking down, forming a mildewed mess. Coarser material like tree cuttings after pruning, hedge cuttings, cabbage and cauliflower stalks must be chopped fine before being placed on the heap.

Completely cover the heap with soil when it is about 1,4 m high.

Keep the heap damp but not wet. During dry weather it ought to be watered about once a week. During summer the plant material breaks down faster and the heap should be ready for turning within four to five weeks but during the winter months this may take from six to seven weeks.

When turning the heap the outer material should be placed in the middle, and the topmost material at the bottom of the new heap. Again cover the heap with a layer of soil and let it remain there until compost is needed. Good compost should be crumbly and dark of colour and have a pleasant earthy smell.

All types of plant material as well as kitchen waste (including eggshells) can be used to make good compost. Do not use sickly plant material or weeds that have already seeded. Although it is believed that the high temperatures in a heap will stop any weed seed from germinating, this is seldom the case.

Some herbs that are beneficial to compost making are:

Borage – an annual herb that makes a good addition due to its abundance of flowers, large leaves and hollow stems. Roughly chop the stems before adding to the compost.

German Chamomile – a good compost additive as its fine green feathery leaves help to sweeten the mix and subdue odours. High in calcium it helps compost with the intake of nutrients from other plant material.

Comfrey – has a high moisture content. The leaves are rich in vitamins B12, A and C, phosphorus, calcium and potassium which it draws up from sub soils.

Yarrow – a perennial herb with fine dark green, fern like leaves which grows to about 90 cm. Two to three leaves added to the compost heap make a good activator.