



Home Composting Fact Sheet

The Wiltshire Wildlife Trust has kindly supplied NRG with the following Composting Fact Sheet.

You can also get Help and Advice on their Composting Hotline (01380) 725 670 ext 266 or by emailing them on: compost@wiltshirewildlife.org

A Quick Guide to Composting

Where to put the compost bin?

... Make sure that your bin is in a warm place and easy to get to - you still have to feed it in the rain!

... Dig the soil underneath where it is going to stand, making it easier for all the bugs to get in and start munching

What to feed the compost bin?

... The bugs that do all the work inside the bin need a balanced diet, air and water - just like people do

... The best way to make sure this happens is to fill up your compost bin as if you are making a pile of sandwiches filled with leftovers

The bread (dry brown stuff)... Scrunched up cardboard, loo rolls, twigs, sawdust, wood shavings, straw, pruning, paper towels, egg boxes, horse manure

The filling (soggy wet stuff)... Vegetable peelings, tea bags, leftover bits of fruit, weeds, grass clippings, coffee grounds, old flowers

... Too much bread and it will all dry out, being too chewy for the bugs

... Too much filling and the bread will go soggy and you end up with slushy, smelly goo... and a line of bugs running in the opposite direction!

On top of the bread would be another layer of filling, then bread, then filling and so on... (don't worry about having perfect layers, often things get mixed together when you collect them and that is fine)

The 4 Essential Requirements of a Healthy Heap

Like any living thing your compost bin needs Food, Moisture, Warmth and Air. It is a living system and if you don't look after the bugs that help make compost, they can't do the job

Food comes from the materials that you put into your compost bin. Like us, a compost bin needs a balanced diet with a wide range of different ingredients. This includes GREEN materials rich in Nitrogen and BROWN materials rich in Carbon

BROWNS are dry, fibrous materials such as: Twigs, paper, cardboard, loo rolls, egg boxes, sawdust and straw

GREENS are soft, sappy materials with high water content such as: Vegetable peelings, grass clippings, teabags, nettles and freshly dug weeds

Warmth is provided by the sun and during hot weather the composting process speeds up. In the Hebrides composting can take two to three years to properly rot down, where as in some areas of Africa it can take two to three months provided there is enough moisture. Clearly the weather in Wiltshire is out of our control, however if you can position your compost bin in a sunny position it will compost faster than if it is placed in the shade

Moisture in a compost bin comes from the soft sappy materials that tend to be GREEN in colour and include grass cuttings, weeds, fruit and vegetable peelings. However, on their own these ingredients will rot down into a slimy, smelly mush; they need the addition of materials that provide air pockets mixed in with them

Air is provided by ingredients that have structure; they tend to be BROWN in colour and include hedge trimmings and other woody waste plus paper and cardboard. If you didn't have any GREENS mixed in with your BROWNS, the BROWNS would take much longer to compost. Remember to mix the ingredients up before they go in the bin then you don't need to worry about your compost not having enough air and it needing turning.

Stop The Slime & Nasty Niff's!!

What causes the slime?

- ... Too many 'green materials' being added e.g. grass clippings, fruit and vegetable peelings
- ... Compost getting too wet e.g. too much rain getting in
- ... Not enough air, so that the most important bugs cannot survive

The effect this has...

- ... The compost cannot decompose properly due to the lack of air
- ... All the bugs and insects that do the work slow down or die due to water logging or suffocation
- ... The compost heap will smell and go slimy!

Solutions...

- ... Add 'brown materials' such as torn up cardboard, scrunched or shredded paper, junk mail and envelopes, garden prunings
- ... Mix the 'brown' and 'green' things well so that there are no large layers of either
- ... Only water the compost if it needs it (the compost should be as damp as wrung out sponge so give it a squeeze if you are not too sure!)
- ... Check the middle of the heap as it may be wet, whilst the top appears to be dry. If this happens, turning the compost heap will even things out
- ... Add air by turning or mixing your compost with a fork
- ... Too much grass? Leave the grass on the lawn, this will return nitrogen to your soil and help the soil retain moisture - keeping it green in the summer

The most common composting mistake is to put too many grass cuttings in the compost bin. Grass contains a lot of water; it heats up quickly and needs a lot of oxygen to rot it down. Large quantities of grass cuttings on their own will create a slimy, smelly mass. The addition of fine woody material or screwed up paper and cardboard mixed throughout the grass ensures that air pockets are incorporated into the mixture

Remember it is much easier to add air as you go along with things like loo rolls, scrunched newspaper, straw and twigs, than to add air once you have filled the bin!

Can You Really Compost Cardboard?

Anything that was once living will naturally compost. Cardboard is made from paper pulp that comes from trees and so is perfect for composting

What kind of paper and card can be composted?

If you already recycle your newspapers, don't compost them. But, there is so much paper and card that isn't suitable for recycling that, at the moment ends up with your rubbish when it could be composted

Things to include are old envelopes (remove the plastic window first), ripped up cereal packets, toilet rolls, cardboard egg boxes and soiled tissues, paper from a document shredder

Avoid frozen food packaging and cartons used to hold liquids, as these tend to be lined with a thin film of plastic or foil that cannot break down naturally. If you are not sure put it in anyway! You can always put it in the bin later on

Are the inks safe?

In the old days inks contained toxic heavy metals such as lead, and there is still a widespread belief that the inks are poisonous. They are not anymore

In fact the heavy metal content is lower than it is in most garden soils, so by adding paper and cardboard you are actually improving your garden soil by diluting any existing heavy metals in your garden soil that occur naturally

Glossy paper and card is also suitable. It is the addition of clay that makes paper glossy, though it may take a little longer to breakdown so rip it up in to smaller bits before screwing it up

Try not to put flat sheets of paper in, as this will prevent air from circulating in your heap

Will it take longer?

... The process will be a little slower than 'traditional hot composting', but what is the hurry!

... Your compost will not get really hot but this is not a problem. If you have weeds that you are concerned about adding, in case they spread - simply put them into a black bag with a few holes and stash them behind the shed for a year. They partially rot down and can then be safely added to your compost bin

Leaf Mould

Throwing away and burning leaves is a waste, you are throwing away an excellent material that would otherwise benefit your garden greatly. Leaf mould is made from decayed autumn leaf-fall, through the slow action of fungi. Unlike the bacterial activity in a well-aerated compost heap, fungi do not create a significant rise in the temperature. Leaf mould therefore takes longer to make; for this reason large quantities of Autumn leaves should not be added to your compost bin

To make leaf mould, collect the leaves after it has been raining, so they are wet, and simply heap them into a wire cage. If they are dry when you collect them, just add water to the heap. Once you have collected the leaves the heap can be left untended. If you only have small quantities of leaves put them in a black bin liner with a few holes in and leave them under a hedge

You can use leaves from any deciduous tree. Leaves from conifers and other evergreens acidify the leaf mould. This can be an advantage if you are trying to use compost for acid loving plants such as rhododendrons and azaleas

The type of leaf will affect the rate of decay. Plane or sycamore leaves tend to be slow to break down and beech and oak are traditionally thought to make better compost; most gardeners mix all their leaves together. Shredding or chopping the leaves will speed up the rate of decomposition

After a year the heap will have sunk considerably and the leaves will be partially rotted. The young leaf mould can be spread over or dug into the soil to improve its structure. Leave the leaves to rot for another year and you will get a finer product that could be used in the place of peat as a potting compost for container plants

Using leaf mould

On the vegetable patch

Particularly valuable as a winter cover, applied in the autumn to vegetable beds that are not having a winter cover of green manures

In the fruit garden

Particularly valuable for young trees, those on dwarfing rootstock and trees that are under stress. All fruit will benefit from an occasional layer of leaf mould around the base of the plant or tree

On container plants

Apply a thick layer to the top of the soil in the Autumn

It's Taking Too Long!

We cannot stop and start natural processes; we can only change the factors within the environment which influence the way nature works. Composting bins and heaps are essentially a way of creating the ideal conditions for nature to break things down

Why is it so slow?

It can take from two months to a year to make good compost. The time it takes depends on a range of factors:

... The weather - the colder it is the slower the process

... The ingredients - the bigger the bits of material you are putting in the longer it will take for them to be broken down, also if you do not have a balanced mixture of green and brown material going into the bin it is harder for the bugs to get a balanced diet and so will not function as well as they could

... Lack of air for the bugs to breathe and/or a lack of moisture

Solutions...

... Make sure that you are putting in a good mixture of BROWN & GREEN materials

... Chop up or shred large things that you want to compost - the smaller things are, the quicker they will break down

... During the winter activity in your compost bin will slow down. You can insulate your heap or bin using bits of old carpet, cardboard or bubble wrap. Old sleeping bags are a brilliant way of insulating plastic compost bins!

... To add air - stir or turn the compost around and add more Brown materials (e.g. crumpled up newspaper) that not only provide food but will also trap air

... To add moisture - (if you squeeze a handful it should be the same as squeezing a wrung out sponge). Simply add more Green materials and leave the lid off and let the rain in. Simply turning the compost might balance out the moisture content as sometimes they can be dry on the outside but wet in the middle

What about Activators?

When compost is working well there is no need for any activators, if you use the solutions above your compost will steadily get back into working order on its own

Activators are either a concentrated form of Nitrogen or a dose of healthy bugs. The best activator you can use is urine! If you don't fancy that then below are a few other suggestions...
... Nettles or comfrey leaves, either put straight on or soaked in water and then the liquid can be added like tea (brilliant for all the garden as it is essentially BabyBio!)
... A few handfuls of healthy soil or compost from a previous batch or neighbour. These will put in to your compost most of the bugs that are needed in an instant
... If you are really desperate there are a whole range of activators you can buy from most garden centres. They range from liquids, which are the same as making comfrey tea to powders, which contain enzymes

The Wrong Sort of Visitors!

Composting is nature's way of recycling. Millions of tiny bugs (most of which we cannot see without a magnifying glass) munch the things we put into our compost bins for energy. Our compost becomes an amazing ecosystem, providing food and habitat from a huge range of creatures that not only eat the compost but also each other. So seeing many tiny creatures and other signs of life like fungus proves that nature has taken control and is doing all the hard work for you! However some creatures are less welcome than others

Flies...

Flies are generally attracted to any easy-to-eat food that is in their path. Compost bins and heaps are no exception. The most common flies are very tiny Fruit Flies. As their name suggests they are attracted by the smell of very ripe, rotting fruit which they eat, and so are just another part of the compost bin ecosystem

When there are large numbers of them it can often be a bit unpleasant when you lift the lid so try the following suggestions to keep the numbers down:

... When you add food scraps always cover them with a layer of scrunched up paper or cardboard straight away
... Leave the lid off slightly, the fruit flies will then come and go without you noticing!
... Bigger blue bottles are only attracted to meat - so don't put any in

Furry Creatures...

Compost bins are nice, warm places to live in with a possible source of food

The vast majority of people NEVER have any problems with mice or rats in their compost!

If you are concerned about the possibility of them coming to your heap, then there are a number of things you can do:

... Rats and mice don't like people and don't like to be exposed, so if possible move your compost heap or bin about 1 meter away from any walls, fences or hedges

- ... Regularly visiting your bin or heap and giving it a prod will cause enough disturbance to make them move on
- ... Cover any open areas with wire mesh with small holes - if you have a plastic bin it is just a case of covering the base, if you have an open heap then line the back and sides
- ... Try to avoid adding meat, dairy, fish and fried foods, as these are a particular treat for mice and rats
- ... Sprinkle cayenne pepper liberally around the bottom of your compost heap or bin and this should help to deter them

Why Compost at Home?

There are many reasons why it is a good idea to compost at home

Composting helps the environment by:

- ... Reducing the amount of rubbish thrown away - 50% of what we put in to our rubbish bins can be composted!
- ... Reducing the need for chemical fertilisers
- ... Reducing the number of car journeys to the tip
- ... Eliminating the need to use peat, peat bogs are home to some of our rarest plants and animals

Composting can save you money by:

- ... Reducing the need to buy mulches, soil improvers and fertilisers from the garden centre
- ... Composting makes your garden grow!
- ... Compost improves soil structure
- ... Compost feeds plants and your soil
- ... Compost helps your soil retain moisture