

Composting at Meadow Farm

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Our soil is naturally a heavy yellowish clay, but parts of the garden were re-graded to a slacker slope by the previous owner using tipped subsoil with a sprinkling of topsoil for a grass finish.

Consequently, ever since we moved here in September 1998, we have been trying to improve the soil in our planting beds, initially by double digging and the addition of manure, gravel, and bought-in composted waste, but now by incorporating our own home-produced compost.

Most gardeners have a compost heap of some sort, and have varying degrees of success in producing anything worthwhile. Much has been written about the techniques of composting, and although we had tried a compost heap in our small garden in Birmingham and on our allotment, we never really produced sufficient for our needs. Now with an acre of garden and a nursery, both of which produce lots of suitable material, we have been able to master the art of producing good compost.

Three things are critical - volume, shredding, and water.

Firstly, volume, and the bigger the heap the better it will heat up and rot down. We don't have unlimited space, and decided to have three compost bays set side by side, one 'cooking', one being filled, and one being emptied of its finished compost. Each bay is 1.6m wide, 1.15m deep, and 1m high, and has slatted removable boards at the front which are added as the heap grows and removed as it is being emptied. The volume of compost contained in each bay is just less than 2 cubic metres, which yields about 30 heaped barrow loads of compost. Each bay gets filled, 'cooked', and emptied twice a year, so we get around 180 barrow loads of useable compost every year.

Secondly, shredding. Since we have been shredding material before adding it to the heap, we have found that it heats up much more quickly and evenly and rots down rapidly. We have a petrol shredder for the more woody material, but for light herbaceous material we simply cut it up with secateurs as we collect it. I also use a Honda Izy rotary mower as a shredder for small quantities, simply by tipping the material to be shredded onto a grass area, and running over it with the mower. We use the Honda, too, to collect hedge clippings, and this method does the picking up and the shredding in one go. We never include seed heads or perennial roots in our compost heaps, so these are always cut off, bagged and taken to the tip. This way the resulting compost remains fairly free of weeds.

Thirdly, water. The organisms which break down the material in the heap do not thrive and multiply in dry conditions, so we make sure that our compost heaps remain moist by watering them as they are built.

We try to compost all of our household green waste, as well as material from the garden, so we have a separate bin under the sink to collect it. When we have visitors to the garden, their cake is served on paper plates which after use get torn up and included in the compost heap. Grass from the twice weekly lawn mowing is mixed thoroughly with coarser material so as to avoid the slimy, airless, and smelly mess

which results if it is tipped in a heap on its own. Mixed with coarser material it helps to build up heat, and speeds the overall rotting process.

Many of the articles we have read about composting recommend emptying the heap, turning the material, and rebuilding it but we have never found the need to do this. The idea is to get the heap to heat up again by admitting air, but a good mix of shredded coarse material and leafy stuff is sufficiently aerated and rots quickly. And anyway it's hard work!

When the compost bay is full to the top, it is given a good watering and then covered by a piece of old carpet to help retain the heat generated as it rots. The heap sinks as it rots and now and again we top it up with new material and cover it again. After about four to six months the contents of the heap have cooled down and rotted sufficiently, ready for use. The very top layer is usually used to feed the next heap, but not far down is brown crumbly compost. Used as a surface mulch, rather than dug in, the soil in our beds is gradually but noticeably improving.

Visitors often remark on how lucky we are to have such good and fertile soil - little do they know!