

# Compost

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I have had my allotment for over 20 years and the first task I undertook was to build some compost bins.



I used whatever pieces of wood I could find and over the years just a few have been replaced. When I built them, I laid down sticks in the bottom to help air circulation and left small gaps between the wooden slats. One year I had someone kindly offer to turn my compost - something I stopped doing myself when I was about 60. Unfortunately, he did not realise the purpose of the sticks in the bottom and mixed them all in - they still turn up, get chopped and go back in.

I keep a black plastic sheet over the top which keeps moisture in and being black is warmer than other colours. I used to add a couple of bags of farmyard manure during the year but have stopped doing this as it didn't seem to be necessary. I do add bonfire ash in a thin layer from time to time and always sprinkle a watery herbal mix called QR (stands for Quick Return) between the layers. QR is a compost activator which I learnt about in the 70s devised by a lady called May Bruce and recommended by the Soil Association. It is made from nettles and a variety of herbs/weeds and I buy it as a dry powder. You can make it yourself but I've not tried as I don't have any nettles nor the right weeds.

I leave the heaps until I run out of bin space which may be as long as a year but sometimes, as I am a heavy mulcher, I check the bins after just six months in the summer and it all seems to have broken down nicely. (I also now have 4 plastic bins.)

As my plot is on the main path I have a lot of grass cuttings and everything gets composted in layers of different types of material. I bring all my vegetable food waste from home and compost everything including all weeds! I do sometimes see a white root from the bindweed or couch grass which comes in from the path but it's easy to spot. The only thing I won't compost is infected material, when I get tomato blight for instance, and fungal things on leaves on the fruit trees. I chop woody material into small pieces with the secateurs and bigger bits go to the annual bonfire. When I empty a bin anything which has not broken down sufficiently goes back in and that is generally a very small amount of material from around the edges.

When I see Monty Don suggesting you turn your compost 3 or 4 times I wonder what difference it would make. I do wonder what the worms think? They are nicely munching their way up through the pile when suddenly they are thrown upside down! He says it's to aerate the pile but I don't even have the pile of sticks at the bottom anymore and it all seems to rot down well. Or maybe it would deter visitors? Such as a rat!

Once when I took off the plastic sheet it sat looking at me for several seconds before we both ran away. The solution I then found out was to add water if the heap is getting dry as they are looking for nest sites, not food. This also prevents ants from making nests. Another more welcome visitor is the slow worm which basks underneath the plastic sheet. My most unwelcome visitors however have been the worst!

Towards the middle of one summer I went to empty the bin. I thought at first I had an ant's nest as the compost on the top was very fine. However within seconds of poking about with my fork I was surrounded and stung by wasps! A while later I tried watering them away with the hose but that just made them more angry. I removed the wooden slats at the front but it was fraught with danger and then a fellow allotmentee mentioned that she wasn't happy passing by, so in the end I called the allotment officer who sent out pest control. I suspect it is the wood which has caused the problem as it is probably ideal chewing material for them to make their nest from. I have since painted it on the outside with the shed paint and hope that will be enough to deter them as I don't think it would be considered organic if I painted the inside. I'd be very interested to hear about anything else I could do to deter them in future. I dug out all the compost after the allotted time the pest control man said it would be all clear and expected to find a nice round ball to give my grandsons to take to school, but apart from a few shredded papery bits, which looked like scraps of wasp nest, there was nothing, well except lovely compost.

So, every year I enjoy marvelling at the process that quietly occurs and feeds my ground. The only problem with my compost is it doesn't make its own way onto the beds!