

# Garden Composting

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Most gardeners have a compost heap of some sort, and have varying degrees of success in producing anything worthwhile. Over the years that we have been seriously composting, we have learnt our current method through trial and error.

Four things are critical - **volume, shredding, water** and **contents**.

Firstly, **volume**, and the bigger and fuller the heap, the better it will heat up and rot down. If you don't have unlimited space, two compost bays set side by side, one 'cooking' and one being filled is the best option. Each bay needs to be about 1.2m wide, 1.2m deep, and 1.2m high, with slatted removable boards at the front which are added as the heap grows and removed as it is being emptied. If you have room for three bays, and have plenty of compostable material, then go for three bays. We made ours from 100mm x 100mm corner posts and 150mm x 25mm timber 'gravel boards', cut to length and simply nailed on to provide the back and sides. Leaving gaps between the boards is not really necessary as they will shrink with age, forming sufficient aeration gaps all by themselves.

Secondly, **shredding**. Take absolutely no notice of Monty Don, who apparently just chucks everything onto a big pile and waits. 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 into a useable and quite fine compost within a few months in the warmer seasons. We have a Bosch AXT 2000 Rapid electrical shredder for the more woody material, but for light herbaceous material we simply cut it up into short sections with secateurs or shears as we collect it. We also use a rotary mower as a shredder for small quantities of leafy stuff which might clog the shredder, simply by tipping the cut material onto a grass area, and running over it and collecting it with the mower. We have used the mower, too, to collect hedge clippings, and this does the picking up and shredding all in one go.

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 stay moist by watering them as they are built. But too much water can be detrimental to good aeration, so in very wet weather we place a square of old carpet on the top of the heap to keep out the rain. A layer of insulation on the top of the heap retains the generated heat and speeds up composition - it can be as simple as the square of old carpet or can be a specially made lid using polystyrene sheet panels from a builder's merchant.

Fourthly, **contents**. You need a mixture of materials to make a good compost heap. Ours is primarily from the garden - prunings, herbaceous plant material (especially when cutting down in late autumn) and lawn mowings, all combined with shredded paper and cardboard (preferably soaked overnight before being added) and raw vegetable and fruit scraps or peelings from the kitchen, too. Keep a separate bin under the sink for these and include tea bags, coffee grounds, used sheets of kitchen roll, and anything else that was once green material. Everything should be chopped up into small pieces.

From the garden material, we never include seed heads or perennial roots in the compost heap, so these are always cut off, bagged up and taken to the tip. This way the resulting compost remains fairly free of weeds or unwanted seedlings.

Many of the articles we have read about composting recommend emptying the heap and rebuilding it, but we have never found the need to do this. The idea of rebuilding 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! If you turn in new material to the depth of a garden fork as you add it, you need do no more.

The heap sinks as it rots, but eventually you will reach the top of the container and it's time to start the second heap. After about four to six months the contents of the first heap have cooled down and rotted sufficiently for use. The top layer is used to feed the next heap (as it has not had enough time to rot completely), but not far down is brown crumbly compost. Using it as a surface mulch, rather than digging it in, will noticeably improve the soil in your beds - and look good, too. The more compost you make and spread, the better the improvement, and worms do all the work of incorporation for you.

The problem with most small gardens is generating enough material for effective composting, but you soon become adept at sourcing suitable stuff – we scrounge grass clippings from our neighbours, who are only too glad to be rid of them, and we have bought an office paper shredder so that all our junk mail, newspapers, magazines and the like are shredded and added to the compost heap. Cardboard boxes and packaging, egg cartons and so on are torn into small pieces by hand and also make their way to the heap. In autumn you can collect fallen leaves from anywhere you can find them, but they should definitely be shredded if you are going to mix them directly into the compost heap. Oak and beech leaves are to be preferred, but definitely avoid sycamore leaves as they are too 'stalky' to rot down quickly, and collected birch, ash and sycamore will contain hundreds of seeds. However, if sycamore, birch and ash are all you can find, you need to build a separate heap and be prepared to wait a couple of years before it becomes useable. In a small garden, it's a waste of valuable space. You'll be amazed at how addictive it all becomes!