

# Compost hints & tips



## Autumn leaves

Store some dry leaves to mix with grass clippings and other soft green plant material, ready to use on your compost heap. If you have large quantities you can turn them into leafmould - stuff wet leaves into large black plastic bags (loosely tied), or a wire mesh container. Use after a year or two. You can mow leaves on a lawn to chop and collect them easily in the catcher.



## Grass clippings

Mix well with tougher items to avoid a slimy mess. Leave on the lawn whenever possible - they will soon disappear and feed the grass; if mowed regularly this will not cause 'thatch'. Can also be mixed into a leafmould heap, or used as mulch.



## Diseased plants

Persistent diseases are best avoided. A hot heap, turned several times, should deal with everything else. Diseases that don't need living plants to survive - grey mould, mildews, wilts - may survive in a slow, cool heap. But heat is not the only factor that will kill diseases - the intense microbial activity will also help to dispose of them.



## Perennial weeds

Some perennial weeds will be killed in a hot heap; avoid really persistent horrors such as celandine, bulbous buttercup, ground elder and bindweed. To dispose of these weeds don't burn or dump them - they are rich in plant foods. Mix them with grass clippings in a plastic sack. Tie it up and leave for a few months until the weeds are no longer recognisable, then add to the compost heap or use (diluted) as a liquid fertiliser.



## Weed seeds

Weed seeds may survive a cool heap, but should be killed in a hot one. If you find that your compost tends to grow weeds, dig it in rather than spreading it on the soil surface.



## Hedge clippings and prunings

Chop or shred tough prunings and clippings from evergreen hedges before adding to a mixed compost heap. Compost large quantities separately; even unshredded they will rot eventually. Mix with grass or other activating material; water well, then cover. In anything from a few months to years you will have a coarse mulch which can be used on perennial beds.



## *Animal manures*

Straw horse and cattle manure, chook and pigeon manures all compost well. Keep a sack on hand to bulk up other ingredients. Manure mixed with wood shavings should be left to rot until the shavings are no longer visible. If it is dry, water well and mix with grass clippings, poultry manure or other activating materials. When rotted, use as a surface mulch. Wood shavings incorporated into the soil can lock up soil nitrogen, making it unavailable for plants for a year or more.

Small pets, like hamsters, don't produce many droppings but you can still use their waste as a strawy addition to the compost heap. Guinea pigs are marvellous - they love eating weeds and convert them quickly to prime compost material!



## *Paper products*

Newspaper can be added to a compost heap, but if you have a lot it really should be recycled into more paper. Cardboard, paper towels and other paper items can be torn into strips and composted. They are particularly useful where kitchen scraps make up a high proportion of the compost ingredients. Avoid glossy paper and colour print.



## *Sawdust and wood shavings*

These items are very slow to decay. Add in small quantities; balance with quick-to-rot activating materials. See also 'Animal manures' above. Do not use if treated with wood preservatives.

# Your Composting Questions Answered

## What is garden compost?

Compost looks like rich, dark soil. It is made of recycled kitchen and garden waste. It is used to feed and condition the soil and in making potting mixes.

## Is it the same as multipurpose compost?

No. Sowing, potting and multipurpose composts that you buy in garden centres are mixtures of various materials such as sand, coir and fertilisers. These are used for raising seedlings and growing plants in pots.

## Do I have to be an expert to make compost?

No. Composting just happens - it is nature's way of keeping our planet clean. Just follow the few basic rules in this guide.

## Is it a lot of work?

Making compost can be as easy as putting a few weeds and vegetable scraps onto a compost heap - or you can put a lot of effort into it. It's up to you.

## How long does it take?

Compost can be made in six to eight weeks, or it can take a year or more. In general, the more effort you put in, the quicker you will get compost.

## Will a compost heap breed pests?

Compost is made by a host of small and microscopic creatures. These are not pests and will not overrun your garden.

## Do I need any special equipment?

A garden fork is the only essential item. A compost bin keeps everything neater but it is not essential.

## Will a compost heap attract rats?

Rats may visit a compost heap, but only if they are already present in the area.

### *Is compost safe to handle?*

Yes, if the usual garden hygiene rules are followed. Keep cuts covered, always wash your hands before eating and keep your anti-tetanus protection up to date.

### *Does a compost heap have to get hot?*

No; a medium-sized compost heap can heat up to 70°C in a few days. The heat helps to make quicker compost, and to kill weeds and diseases. But your compost may never heat up, especially if it is made over a long period. The compost can be just as good, but it will take longer to be ready for use.

### *Does compost spread weeds and diseases?*

Some weed seeds and plant diseases will survive in a slow, cool compost heap - if you add them in the first place.

### *Do I need a shredder to make compost?*

No. A shredder can be very useful where there is a lot of woody material to be composted, but it is not essential. However, the smaller the materials are to start with, the quicker they will be converted to compost.