



ERCCIS



Cornwall

Composting - the art of natural recycling

We already recycle a lot of our rubbish but composting is another simple way to help reduce the amount of waste going to landfill and causing problems such as methane production (a global warming gas) and groundwater pollution. It might be surprising to learn that on average more than a third of household waste is organic and can be composted.

Why Compost?

As well as being a good source of nutrient-rich food for your garden, compost heaps also make excellent habitats for a range of wildlife, providing an abundant food supply for micro-organisms and invertebrates, a warm place for slow-worms, toads and hedgehogs to shelter or hibernate, a breeding site for grass snakes and a source of insects and seeds for birds. Homemade compost is also much cheaper than peat-based products and its use helps to protect the vulnerable, wildlife-rich bog habitats that are severely degraded through peat extraction.



Photo: Sheila McCann-Downes

The key things to remember are:

- Choose a reasonably sunny and easily accessible site.
- The heap should be in direct contact with soil to let worms and other decomposers in and out and allow excess water to drain. Don't worry if your heap is on a concrete or stone base, just put a layer of soil at the bottom which will help with drainage.
- The heap needs to be protected from getting too wet or dry with some form of lid or cover.
- Aeration speeds the process and helps prevent smells. Make sure you include a good balance of 'browns' and 'greens' (see over) and turn your compost once in a while using a garden fork or aerating tool to add air to the mixture.

Getting started

Compost can be made in a number of ways. If you have the space, you could simply build up a large, open pile which will allow access for hedgehogs and toads. Plastic compost bins may be tidier, easier to manage and useful for smaller gardens but will only benefit smaller creatures. Perhaps the best compromise is a wooden slatted compost bin. These are very simple to make using pallets or other scrap wood, with a piece of old carpet for the lid.



Example of a simple homemade wooden slatted bin.
Photo: Cheryl Marriott

How does composting work?

All sorts of organisms help to decompose organic matter: microbes including bacteria and fungi and invertebrates such as worms, millipedes, slugs, woodlice, beetles, ants and earwigs. Feeding on the contents, they break it down into finer particles, resulting in a useful compost containing nutrients readily available for plants. A well managed compost heap creates the perfect conditions to speed up this natural process.

If buying a plastic bin, choose one made from recycled materials.



Slugs and snails help to break down organic matter within a compost heap and also attract hungry birds! Photos: Terry Dunstan

Basically.....

Organic waste + Moisture + Warmth + Air + Decomposers + Time = Compost!

Feeding your compost heap

Creating the right feast for your composting creatures is essential. They need both nitrogen-rich 'greens' for growth and carbon-rich 'browns' for energy. A 50/50 mix in alternate layers is best, so don't put in too much of one thing.

Greens (soft and wet)

include:

- Raw fruit and vegetable scraps
- Tea bags
- Coffee grounds and filter paper
- Crushed eggshells
- Grass cuttings
- Annual plants and flowers
- Young hedge clippings
- Horse manure

Browns (hard and dry)

include:

- Shredded/crumpled cardboard and newspaper
- Hay and straw
- Wood chippings
- Chopped woody prunings
- Dry leaves
- Old woolly jumpers and cotton clothes
- Vacuum bag contents
- Bedding from vegetarian pets (rabbits, guinea pigs)

Things not to add:

Cat and dog faeces, disposable nappies, diseased plants, perennial weeds, thick woody material and shiny paper or card. Also avoid cooked food (including vegetables), meat, fish, dairy products and bread - unless you're using a composting system which allows these such as a Green Johanna or Green Cone.

Clearing out your garden pond?

Excess silt and vegetation can also be placed on your compost heap. In fact, composting is the best way to dispose of vigorous aquatic plants as many are non-native invasive species which cause problems in the wild. Leave the vegetation by the side of the pond for a couple of days before transferring to the compost heap to allow wildlife to return to the pond.

Tips for keeping your heap happy:

- Check the heap every couple of weeks. If it's too dry, add water; if it's too wet, add more woody material cut into small pieces.
- If nothing appears to be happening, add some nitrogen-rich compost activators like nettles, comfrey or urine, diluted one part urine to 20 parts water.
- Turn your heap periodically with a garden fork, being careful not to disturb anything that may be nesting inside.

Harvesting and using your compost

Compost may take anything from two months to over a year before it's ready for use, when it will look dark brown and earthy. In general, the more effort you put in, the quicker you will get compost. If you have a bin with a hatch, you can remove small amounts of compost by scraping it out; otherwise, remove the top two thirds of material and take away the bottom third for use. You can bag any compost that isn't needed now and it can be stored for about a year.

Your homemade compost will provide all the things your plants and flowers need. Rough compost can be used as a soil conditioner, improving soil structure and providing nutrients, or as a mulch/top dressing to help retain soil moisture and prevent erosion. It will also help to buffer soils that are very acidic or alkaline while helping to protect against plant disease. Fine compost can be mixed with soil and used in pots and containers. You could even make compost tea: half fill a bucket with compost and top it up with water, leave it for a few days then drain it through an old pair of tights or piece of sacking. The liquid can be diluted and applied as a plant spray or soil drench.



Hedgehogs are one of the many creatures that may enjoy the shelter and safety of a compost heap. Photo: Sam Williams

How about a wormery?

A wormery is an enclosed container housing a colony of special composting worms known as brandlings, tiger worms or red worms. These are ideal if you have limited space as they can be kept indoors or out, take little waste, and produce only a small quantity of compost and a liquid which forms a concentrated plant food. Many different types of wormery are available to buy or you could even make your own.



For further information and advice:

Wildlife Information Service
Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall
and the Isles of Scilly (ERCCIS)
Five Acres, Allet, Truro, Cornwall TR4 9DJ

Tel: (01872) 240777 ext 250
Email: wis@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk
Web: www.ercis.co.uk

Other useful contacts:

- www.recyclenow.com
- www.gardenorganic.org.uk
- www.cornwall.getcomposting.com
(for information about compost bins
subsidised by Cornwall Council)

Get involved:

Submit your wildlife records at www.ercis.co.uk/wildlife_recording

Become a member of Cornwall Wildlife
Trust at www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk