How To Make Compost

As our climate changes, gardens are becoming even more vital to wildlife and people. They can provide shade, absorb carbon, soak up flood water and help to cool buildings.

A well managed network of gardens stretching across Sussex will contribute to the creation of a living landscape, helping wildlife to move more freely and adapt to climate change.

Skill Level: 3 out of 5
Time of Year: All Year

- **Wildlife Friendly**: By having your own compost heap you can help reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. Digging holes in the ground to create landfill sites damages or destroys the wildlife habitats that existed there previously. Composting reduces our use of peat-based fertilisers, as well as chemical fertilisers, which can harm wildlife. Compost heaps also provide a home to garden wildlife such as beetles and slow worms.
- **Climate Friendly**: Organic waste buried underground in landfill sites cannot rot down properly. Instead of beneficial compost, it produces a nasty black slime that pollutes water courses when it escapes, as well as methane, a greenhouse gas 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

**What Is Compost?**
Compost is made from rotting down garden and kitchen waste. This includes dead leaves, grass-cutting, weeds and vegetable peelings. Over time this waste or organic matter is broken down by worms, beetles, bacteria and fungi. Once the compost is formed, all of the nutrients in the waste have been recycled and can be applied to the garden as an organic fertiliser and soil conditioner.

**Why make compost?**
- Compost is a free soil improver and fertiliser, which saves you money. It can be totally organic and reduces the need to purchase artificial fertilisers.
- Compost can be used to replace peat-based products. This is important because lowland peat bogs are under threat from commercial peat extraction, and the wildlife these valuable habitats support is being lost.
- Compost reduces the amount of waste sent to landfills. Up to a quarter of household rubbish can be composted. By reducing the waste you produce, you are reducing the amount of money and energy involved in rubbish collection. Landfill also produces methane, one of the greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming.
- Composting is a smoke-free alternative to burning garden waste, reducing smoke, soot and smells.

Want to know how to improve your garden for wildlife, or build a pond? Have you seen something interesting and want to know what it is? If it’s about wildlife, get in touch.

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What can you compost?
Compost can made from a variety of garden and household waste products. It is best to use a mix of different ingredients, but there are some things that you should not use. Here is a brief guide:

- Grass cuttings, poultry manures, comfrey leaves and young weeds rot quickly and are known as ‘activators’ starting off the composting process.
- Older materials take longer to rot, and give the compost body. For example, fruit and vegetable peelings, tea bags, straw, old bedding plants, rabbit and other pets’ bedding.
- Autumn leaves, tough hedge clippings, woody prunings, wood ash, sawdust and wood shavings (not treated with wood preservative) will take a long time to rot. They should be chopped or shredded into small pieces then mixed with ‘activators’ to ensure rapid composting, although even large pieces will rot eventually.
- Paper products can be composted, although large amounts of paper products are better off being recycled.
- It is best to avoid composting cooked food, dairy products, meat and fish, as this will attract rats and flies to your garden. These pests will not be attracted by plant-based compost.
- Do NOT compost coal and coke ash, cat litter, dog mess, disposable nappies or glossy magazines.

How To Compost
Composting is easy! You do not need any special equipment to make it. A simple heap on the ground, preferably about one metre square in size, will compost well.

- Most people choose a compost container, as these are tidier and easier to manage. Any material can be used to make the container, but ideally it will have a lid to keep out the rain and have easy access for adding, turning and removing the compost. The container should be placed directly on the ground. This aids draining, and also allows worms and insects easy access.
- Your compost needs to be kept moist, but not too wet or too dry. If the heap is dry, wet any material you are adding to the heap. If the heap is wet, leave material out in the sun to dry out before you add it.
- Air is essential to allow ‘good’ micro-organisms to grow in the heap. If there is no air the heap will begin to smell. You can stand your heap on brick, or clay pipes to increase air circulation, but turning the compost regularly will achieve the same effect.
- Composting can be completed in as little as 6 weeks, or as much as a year. In general the more effort you put in, the faster the compost will be produced. Mature compost will be dark brown, crumbly and smells earthy. To get finer compost, you can dry it and pass it through a coarse sieve.

How To Use Compost
In general, one wheelbarrow full of compost provides a rich soil for five square metres, or six square yards, of ground. You should use compost in spring and summer, when the plants are growing. You can apply the compost in a number of ways, depending on the plants you are growing:

- To improve the condition of the soil, as well as increasing fertility, dig the compost into the top 15 – 20 cm (6 – 8 inches) of soil.
- To feed established plants, such as herbaceous perennials and soft fruit trees, use the compost as surface mulch and apply to the soil surface around the base of the plant. In general, 3 to 5 years will be often enough for feeding, unless growth is poor.
- Lawns can be fed by top-dressing with fine compost in the spring or the summer.
- Roses may need feeding every 1 – 2 years if they are pruned hard every year.
- Avoid over-feeding annuals, as the more nutrients they get the more foliage at the expence of flowers.
- Garden compost should only be used for potted plants and seedlings if it is mixed with other ingredients. As a general guide, two parts (by volume) of compost with one part of loam /good soil and one part leaf mould or coir, is a good starting mixture. Experiment to find the best mixtures.

Take a look at the ‘Composting Frequently Asked Questions’ factsheet for more handy tips.