

Earth First

Composting your organics

By Susan Sanders, ECCO

What is Compost?

Composting is the natural breakdown and decomposition of organic material in your garden. Composts usually contain millions of micro-organisms, bacteria, worms, insects, and fungi that help to break down the material into a rich organic soil.

Why compost?

Last week (May 2-8) was International Composting Awareness Week – an annual event aimed at raising awareness of the value of composting and how it can help you.

Each year, Australians discard millions of tonnes of household and garden waste that could be composted. Composting is a cheap and efficient way to get rid of garden waste, lawn clippings, leaves, refuse and kitchen scraps. It can return vital nutrients and minerals to your garden for healthy plant growth.

Another good reason to compost is that landfills are a major contributor of greenhouse gas emissions, particularly if landfill waste is buried and breaks down anaerobically (without oxygen). Buried waste releases damaging leachates, methane and potent greenhouse gasses. By composting at home, we can divert organic matter from landfills and reduce landfill waste by up to 50%.

Making your own compost

There are various ways of making compost. A compost can be made within a plastic bin, a metal tumbler, or even as a single heap of organic waste. Whichever is used, it is important that it is well ventilated and moist (but not wet).

Whether compost is made aerobically (with oxygen) or anaerobically, the basic materials are the same. Composts rely on a balance between moisture, air, and green and brown organic waste. Efficient composts are usually turned from time to time to promote mixing and aeration, and should not be located in direct sun where they can dry out. An open heap compost can be covered with a plastic sheet or hessian to prevent it from drying out.

Ingredients

Simply combine a range of organic materials such as lawn clippings, leaves, hay, flowers, manure, sawdust, woodchips or small branches in your compost. Kitchen food scraps such as fruit, vegetables, tea, bread, cereals, eggshells, and grains are ideal for composts. However meat and dairy products are generally not recommended as they can smell during decomposition or attract rodents.

Citrus and onions skins can also be added in small quantities, but not to worm farms as worms do not like these items. Newspapers, wood ash, vacuum cleaner dust, and even hair can be added to a healthy compost system.

Composts can work on a system of layering or mixing of organic materials. The layering method is slow and cool, and should consist of 10 centimetre layers of organic waste items such as vegetable and fruit scraps, covered by a thin layer of soil and a handful of fertiliser such as blood and bone. This method can produce compost soil in three to six months.

The mixing method is hot and fast, where a wide range of organic waste are tossed in together, and turned regularly. This method involves the rapid decomposition of material and if turned several times a week, can produce compost soil within three to six weeks. A little fertiliser can be added to speed things up.

Trouble shooting

Too wet – improve the drainage or add dry material like newspapers or sawdust.

Too dry – add water or moist compost scraps, like vegetables.

Pests – cover your compost with a lid or a layer of soil, and avoid using meat, bread or dairy products.

Slow break down – check it is moist and aerated, and add manure.

Unpleasant odours – your compost may be too wet or lacks air. Mix the contents thoroughly and avoid meat or dairy products.

For more information, visit

http://www.recyclingnearyou.com.au/documents/2005126_compost_eng.pdf

Happy composting.

Green dates for the calendar

World Environment Day – June 5.