

Composting and Worm Farms



Composting your food scraps and garden material at home offers many benefits for you and the environment. You will improve the quality of your garden, save money and reduce the amount of waste going to landfill.

Composting is a natural process where organic material (food and garden waste) is broken down by micro-organisms over a period of time. The final product is referred to as humus and is dark in colour, crumbly and has a pleasant earthy-smell.

Composting is an easy, inexpensive and efficient way of recycling food scraps and garden material in your own backyard where you can reap the benefits of:

- adding valuable nutrients to the soil
- enhancing the water-holding capacity of soil
- reducing water loss through evaporation
- reducing plant stress during summer
- reducing soil erosion

What can I put in my compost?

- Fallen leaves and fruit
- Dead flowers
- Lawn clippings
- Soft stems of plants
- Twigs and straw
- Vegetable and fruit scraps
- Tea leaves and tea bags
- Coffee grounds
- Vacuum cleaner dust
- Egg shells
- Old newspapers (shredded)
- Small amounts of sawdust, ash & lime
- Tissues

What can't I put in my compost?

- Diseased plants
- Weeds with bulbs or underground storage parts (active compost will destroy most weed seeds)
- Large branches (they won't break down)
- Meat, fish and dairy products (they attract vermin and can smell)
- Timber products treated with chemicals
- Magazines
- Plastics
- Bones
- Cat and dog droppings

Majority of these items can go in your green organics kerbside bin and turned into mulch at a commercial composting facility. The Kerbside Waste and Recycling Calendar lists the materials that can go into the green organics bin.

How to compost

The composting process needs Air + Ingredients + Micro-organisms + Time



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1. Choosing the method

Your compost should be placed in a well-drained, shady position. There are many types of compost units available. Whichever one you choose it is important to operate it aerobically, that means with the help of oxygen, to reduce the potential of unpleasant odours.

Types of units include:

- Plastic bins with ventilation holes or slits in the side
- Metal drums with holes in the side and the base removed
- Metal or plastic rotating drums (tumblers) on a stand
- Enclosures made from timber, bricks or chicken wire
- Open heap (should be covered with a plastic sheet or Hessian material).

It is necessary to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of each method as some designs may attract unwanted animals and vermin or may not be suitable for small properties.

Worm farms are a great alternative to backyard composting for people who live in units or courtyard blocks. Worm farms can turn your kitchen scraps and small garden waste into fertiliser, called castings. Worm castings can be applied to garden beds and to potting mix as a soil conditioner. Compost units and worm farms are available for purchase from most hardware stores and nurseries.

2. Collecting the Ingredients

Your compost needs a mixture of nitrogen-rich (green) materials such as fruit and vegetable peelings, fresh grass clippings and manure and nitrogen-poor (brown) materials such as dry leaves, woody twigs, paper, straw and wood ash. Add some completed compost or rich soil to your compost ingredient list as this will provide the micro-organisms that help break down the compost ingredients and turn them into rich, soil-like compost.

3. Layering

To build the compost, start with a thick layer of coarse material, such as straw, twigs or mulch, follow with a thin layer of food scraps, then a layer of mature grass clippings, then a layer of manure and so on. Make sure you add a little water to the heap after each layer.

4. Maintaining your compost

To assist the composting process you should:

- Regularly mix and turn your compost material to allow air flow
- Keep the compost moist
- Add greens and browns as required for that system but keep layers thin
- Place the compost unit in a well-drained position that is shaded from the sun
- Tear or break up your ingredients into small pieces before adding them to the unit.

5. How to Use Compost

It can take between six weeks and six months for the compost to be ready for use. It all depends on the mix of organic materials and how well the compost process is working. The compost is ready to use when all materials added are unrecognisable and it resembles a deep brown, rich and sweet smelling soil. Use your compost to feed your plants, spread over your lawn, act as a soil conditioner and be a starter for a new compost heap.

Health Precautions

Compost is produced from the breakdown of natural materials and can contain a variety of living organisms. On rare occasions these organisms have been associated with illness and allergies in humans. When dealing with compost it is important to take the following precautions:

- Wash hands after handling compost or soil materials.
- Protect broken skin by wearing gloves
- If you suffer from illness or allergies wear a face mask
- Keep the compost pile moist to prevent fungal spores or bacteria becoming airborne

For further information please contact the City of Mitcham on 8372 8888.

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