

Easy composting

You only need basic equipment and a little effort to make compost to feed your garden. Set up a compost heap now and you will have it ready in time for feeding your spring garden. Gardening expert and compost guru Rachel Knight (www.thekitchengarden.co.nz) explains.

A good supply of rich compost is worth its weight in gold in your garden. It fixes most of the problems in any soil and will make your plants thrive. You'll save time and money taking green waste to the tip. Even better, your rubbish bag will be smaller and smell better if you put

your kitchen scraps in the compost. Kids seem to take to the idea of making compost really quickly, often because they do the same at school. Perhaps it's also because they love the worms and other creatures they find in a thriving compost heap.

You need only basic equipment and a little of your own effort to make compost easily. A plastic compost bin or a few pallets nailed together will work well. Cover with old carpet or tarpaulin to keep the moisture in and the rain out if it doesn't have a lid. Put it somewhere outside that's easily accessible. If you're using kitchen scraps, wrap them in a sheet of newspaper and keep them in a covered bucket under your bench to empty every few days. The newspaper makes the bin easier to empty and soaks up moisture.

Composting is a natural process decomposing dead animal or vegetable matter. Three things will affect the speed at which your ingredients decay:

- Their size – the smaller the pieces, the greater the surface area and the quicker they will rot.

- Moisture – a dry compost heap is a slow one.
- Air – an open texture will avoid a smelly, slimy heap. Turning once or twice will introduce more air and you can check it's moist enough too.

The easiest way to build a compost heap is by layering ingredients as we gather them. After a weekend in the garden our bin might be full, but a week later there will be room for more. Eventually you will need a second bin to start filling whilst the first decomposes. If you've got a plastic bin that lifts off completely you can move it to a new spot and start again, covering the first heap with a tarpaulin until it's ready to use. This might take six months or a year depending on the ingredients. Don't worry if the compost is lumpy and stringy. Toss any larger pieces back on the next heap and spread the remainder where the worms will pull it down into the soil.

The key to making compost easily is to start with the ingredients you have (see below), water well and allow enough time. You'll find you're soon digging up gold in your own garden – black gold.



What to include

Vegetable trimmings, fruit peel, pips and stones (including citrus), corn cobs, tea bags, coffee grounds, tissues, kitchen towel, torn up cardboard, shredded office paper, eggshells, wood ash, pet and human hair, cut flowers, annual weeds, lawn clippings, bedding and manure from pet rabbits, guinea pigs and chooks, seaweed, hedge clippings, autumn leaves, vegetable garden waste including toxic leaves such as potato and rhubarb, comfrey and other green manures.

What to leave out

Uncooked potatoes (zap them in the microwave to stop them re-sprouting) meat, fish, dairy, bones, plastic or laminated packaging, dog and cat faeces, disposable nappies, perennial weeds such as couch grass, convolvulus, ivy, oxalis and other bulbs (put them in a rubbish bin full of water for six months and use the water as a fertiliser tea, add the remaining sludge from the bin to the compost heap once completely rotted), lawn clippings that have been recently treated with pesticides or weed killer.