

Composting Secrets Tipsheet 50p



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Successful composting is not just a load of old rot! Here are some tips that the books don't tell you. Find out why a high fibre diet is best for your garden.

Machynlleth, Powys SY20 9AZ / Tel. 01654 705950 / Fax. 01654 702782 / email. info@cat.org.uk / website. www.cat.org.uk

Every year hundreds of enquirers to the CAT information service complain that their compost is not working. Whatever they do, it turns into a sticky, smelly organic porridge.

Help is at hand!

This problem is caused by the fact that most of the organic matter normally composted is too rich and sloppy. Most households' compost consists of kitchen scraps, weeds from the garden and grass clippings.

Piled on top of each other, these compress into a soft mass that squeezes out the air and stops the composting process dead in its tracks. Another component is needed to keep air spaces open in the heap, a component that is itself compostable.

Paper and cardboard

Paper and cardboard, in various forms, are likely to make up 20-30% of the volume of solid waste in the average dustbin. In principle, you could compost virtually all of it, but some of it is suitable for recycling to make more paper, and this should be taken to the waste paper bank, if there is one near you. The box over the page contains a guide to what you can recycle, what you can compost, and what to do with the rest.

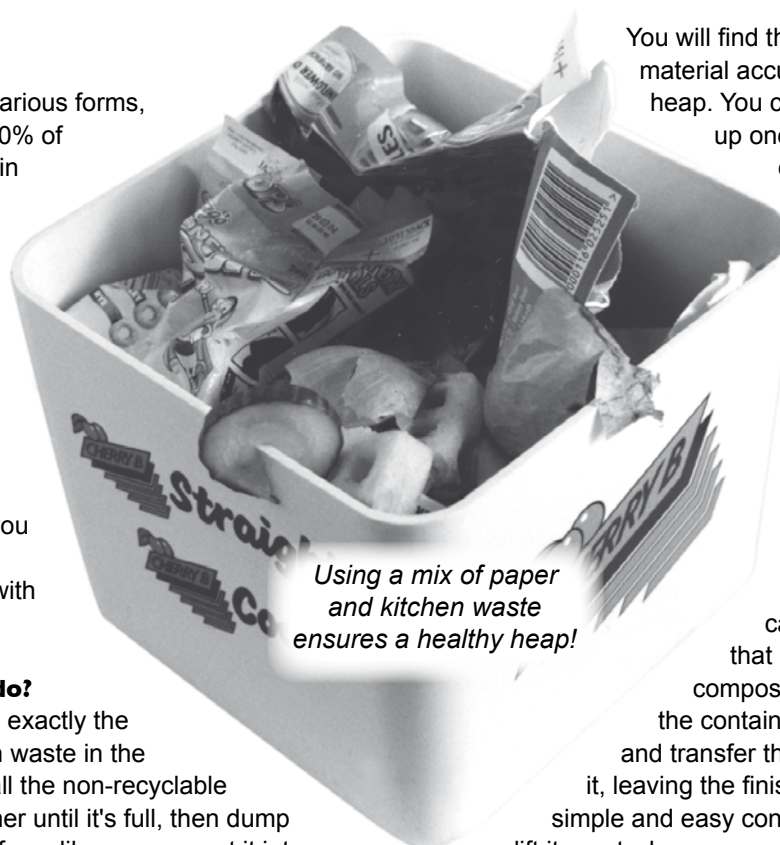
What do you actually do?

In practice, what you do is exactly the same as collecting kitchen waste in the compost bucket: just put all the non-recyclable waste paper into a container until it's full, then dump it into the compost heap. If you like you can put it into the compost bucket straight away, but this means you need a rather large bucket!

It is important not to save up the paper and card and put it in the compost in huge batches. The whole point is that there is a close intermingling of the wet and the dry wastes, so just tip the stuff on as it crops up and the mixing will take place automatically.

The only preparation needed for the paper and card is to ball it or scrunch it up so that it forms irregular shapes that keep air pockets open, don't layer it flat. But there is no need to be too fussy.

With added fibre, the heap explodes into life with visible creepy-crawlies: mostly red worms, woodlice and slugs. There will be no need to turn the heap or attend to it in any way, although it is fun to burrow into it and watch the furious activity – particularly in the summer. Most of these beneficial creatures will turn up on their own and multiply in your heap, but if you are just starting it may be helpful to seed your compost with worms and things from somebody else's compost. Or nip down to the fishing tackle shop to buy some worms.



Using a mix of paper and kitchen waste ensures a healthy heap!

You will find that fine, crumbly brown compost material accumulates at the bottom of the heap. You can run a 'batch' process – filling up one container and starting another one while the first finishes. Or you can run a continuous process, removing the finished compost whenever you need it.

The detailed design of the container does not seem to matter much for batch processing, but for continuous removal you will need something with a removable front, or an openable hatch at the bottom. Alternatively, you can use the kinds of container that unstack or just lift off the compost pile: you restack or replace the container next to the original position and transfer the uncomposted material into it, leaving the finished stuff ready to use. One simple and easy container is a stack of tyres – just lift it apart when you want to get at your compost!

Sometimes the finished compost may be a bit wet. In this case, just leave it in the open for a few days to mature. There may be small bits of plastic in it which you didn't notice on the original cardboard, but these are quite harmless and easily removed.

That's all there is to it!

Paper and cardboard: To recycle or to compost?

Dealing with waste paper, like all recycling, follows the rule of **reduce, reuse and recycle**. Start by cutting down the amount of paper and cardboard you use – don't print things out unless it's really necessary, or minimise the amount of packaging you buy. Then see what you can reuse to improve your compost. Then, concentrate on recycling the sorts of paper most suitable.

The best paper for **recycling** is clean and flat, such as:

- Newspapers
- Glossy magazines
- Flat office paper, envelopes

All other paper and card can and should be **composted**.

This will include:

- Tissues, kitchen towels
- Any crumpled or balled paper
- Soiled papers
- Cereal boxes and other food products

- 'Inner tubes' of toilet rolls
- Egg boxes (or take them to be refilled...)
- Corrugated cardboard
- Shredded paper packing

Etc...

The only kind of paper products that don't work well for composting are containers for liquids that are waxed or lined with foil or plastic, like milk or juice cartons.

A few remarks:

Covers

It doesn't seem to matter if the compost is covered. We have actually had our best results just leaving the compost open to the elements. This compost seems to like rain! Also you don't get a faceful of fruitflies when you open the lid. But keep a lid or cover on if you like – it still works.

Chemical contamination

Some people have asked whether there's a potential problem with chemicals and heavy metals from the inks in paper and card. This is not a problem at all with modern inks, especially if you exclude glossy printed papers like magazines and catalogues just to make sure. In any case, these should be taken to the paper bank for recycling.

Compost containers range from the low-tech, like this tyre stack...



...to the more sophisticated, like this rotating model. Both work equally well!



Not enough paper

If you have very large quantities of soft garden wastes (for example grass clippings from a big lawn), you may need to supplement your supply of paper and card. A good source is corrugated cardboard cartons from retailers and supermarkets. It helps to abuse the cartons a bit first – rip, buckle, squash them. Get kids to do it.

Woody waste in the garden

If you have a shredder, it can all go into the main compost. If not, it's better to keep leaves and woody stuff in a separate heap of their own. They usually take so long to break down that if you put them all in together your lovely compost ends up full of twigs.

The moral

Compost heaps, like people, need plenty of roughage in their diet to stay healthy!

Further information

Composting organisations

• Community Composting Network

tel. 0114 258 0483

www.communitycompost.org

email. info@communitycompost.org

Provides advice and support to new and existing community composting projects across the UK. Contact them to receive their free information pack.

• The Composting Association

tel. 0870 160 3270

www.compost.org.uk

The Composting Association promotes best practice in composting and the uses of composts. The association acts as a central resource for composting, researching, collecting and disseminating information.

• Garden Organic

tel. 024 7630 8202

www.compost-uk.org.uk

The consultancy wing of the HDRA carries out research and provides advice on composting as a sustainable solution to organic waste management.

You may also be interested in the following titles from CAT publications:

• *Creative Sustainable Gardening*, Diana Anthony, CAT Publications, 2000, £12.99

The complete guide to gardening without chemicals.

Includes sections on home composting, soil drenching, foliar feeds and biological controls.

• *Cool Composting* factsheet, £3.50

Describes in detail the 'high fibre' composting system developed at CAT.

• *Urban Gardening* tipsheet, £0.50

Gardening in urban spaces.

• *Growing Year-Round* tipsheet, £0.50

A guide to planting for year long growth.

The above titles are available direct from CAT Mail Order – tel. 01654 705959 to order or receive the complete Buy Green By Mail catalogue. Visit www.cat.org.uk/catpubs to order, read reviews or download tipsheets and factsheets.