

WHAT IS A COMPOST HEAP?

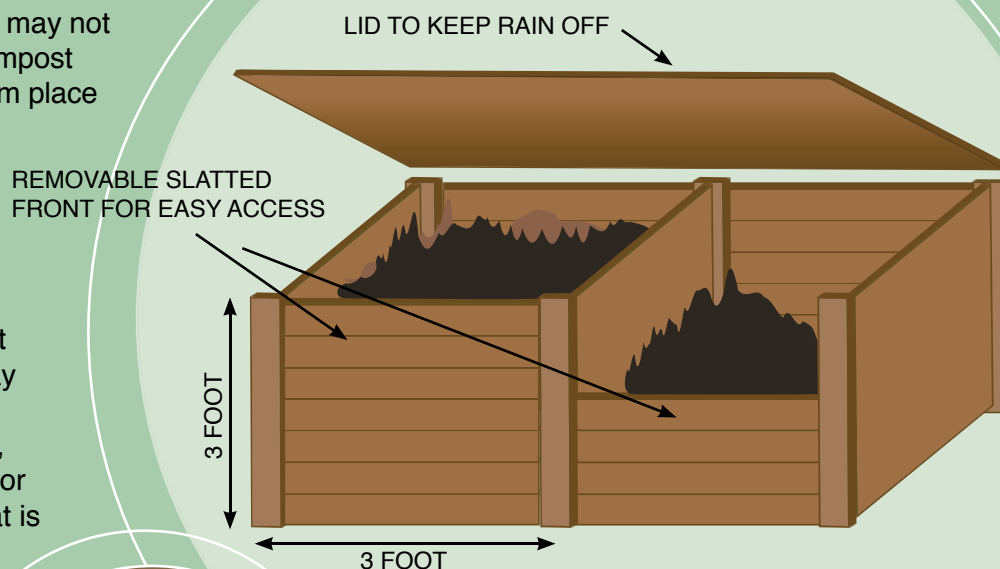
Using compost made from your own garden and kitchen waste is environmentally friendly, free and saves using expensive manures and fertilisers, some of which may not be beneficial to wildlife. A compost heap can also become a warm place of refuge for many small creatures and maybe even a hedgehog. A compost heap really is a must for a wildlife gardener.

Once you have your compost heap made and situated away in a scheduled corner, there is very little to do except fill it, turn it occasionally and wait for it to produce the compost that is so good for your garden. A mixture of bacteria, fungi, worms, beetles and centipedes do all the work, breaking down the waste into compost and if the container is good, they can be remarkably efficient. The only conditions that they need are for a warm and moist, but not wet, environment with some air circulation.

MAKING YOUR CONTAINER

There are numerous types of compost containers on the market. There are compost tumblers which make it easy to turn the compost. These produce compost in 3-4 weeks, but it then still has to be left to mature. There are also special bins made from plastic stacking frames complete with lids. These are good efficient compost bins, but it is not hard to make your own. Compost containers tend to be made from whatever material is at hand and this is fine, but there are some design features that should be incorporated. The best system is to have two smaller bins, one full with composting material with the other still being filled. When the second bin is full, the first should be ready for use in the garden. There should be few gaps in the sides of the container to prevent the compost from cooling down

A TWO COMPARTMENT 'NEW ZEALAND BOX'



WOODEN CONSTRUCTION - STURDY AND INSULATED (SET ON BARE GROUND)



centipede



beetle



worm

and from the edges drying out. If the structure has too many gaps, line the inside of the container with cardboard. A lid is useful in keeping the rain out and if it is hinged, it is much easier to use. If you think that the heap is still becoming wet or that it is not warm enough, put a layer of old carpet over the top of the heap under the lid. It is also much easier to get at the compost when it is mature if the front of the container can be removed. This can either be done by having a detachable front or by having a system of slats on the front that can be lifted out exposing the compost.

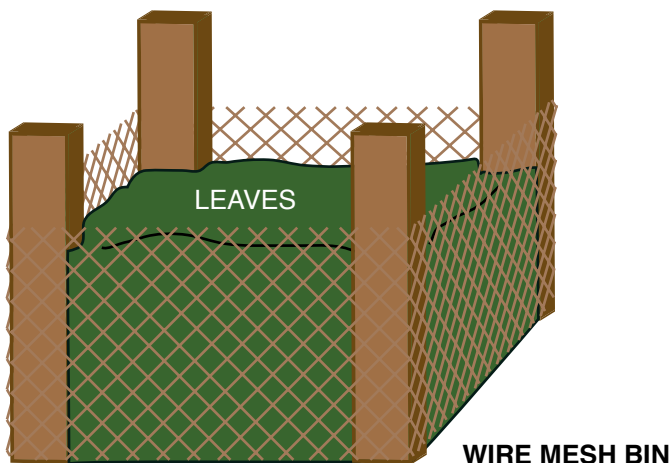
FILLING YOUR COMPOST HEAP

There are some things that should not go into your compost heap. Woody materials such as hedge clippings should be avoided unless they are shredded, as these would take too long to break down. Weeds should also be avoided as the seeds will remain in the compost and germinate when you put it on the garden. Cooked foods can attract rats, and coffee, if still in the filter, can become very hard, so both are not advisable. Potato skins tend to sprout. If you can get straw from stables or farms, this can be incorporated, but be sure there are no herbicides or pesticides in the straw – quite likely if the farm is not organic. Grass cuttings are good in the compost heap, but they can become very slimy, so if you have a lot of cuttings, mix them with shredded newspaper or straw. For the rest, most other garden and kitchen waste is fine to use.

When filling the heap, it is best if the heap is on bare ground so drainage is not impeded. As the heap is composting, it is good to turn it occasionally as this will help aerate the system and prevent it from becoming totally anaerobic, slowing down the composting process. Animal manure or a compost activator adds the nitrogen to the system that the bacteria need and both of these can speed things up. The compost activators can be readily purchased and often include seaweed. Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) or Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale* or *S. x uplandicum*) leaves are also excellent activators. Layers of lime can help neutralize the acidity. Another way of speeding it up is to chop or shred the materials as much as possible before putting them onto the heap.

LEAF COMPOSTING

Leaves do not have so much value in a compost heap, but composted leaves on their own are very good to add to your flower beds to improve the soil structure. Keep the leaves in a separate container. They are best left for two years. The container could be a simple wire mesh bin or just black bags. Make sure that they do not dry out and wet them if they do. Once ready for use, spread out on top of the flower beds. They will become incorporated in the soil quickly enough.



FOR FURTHER READING

- Creating A Wildlife Garden** – *Bob and Liz Gibbons*. 1992. Hamlyn.
- How To Make a Wildlife Garden** – *Chris Baines*. 1985. Elm Tree Books.
- Wildlife Gardening** – *Fran Hill*. 1988. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust.
- The National Trust Book of Wildflower Gardening** - *John Stevens*. 1987. Dorling Kindersley.
- Step by Step Organic Gardening Leaflet: Composting** (50p). Henry Doubleday Research Association. Ryton-on-Dunsmore, Coventry CV8 3LG.
- Step by Step Organic Gardening Leaflet: Making Worm Compost** (50p). Henry Doubleday Research Association. Ryton-on-Dunsmore, Coventry CV8 3LG.
- Successful Organic Gardening** – *Geoff Hamilton*. 1987. Dorling Kindersley.
- The Organic Gardener** – *Bob Flowerdew*.
- The Complete Manual of Organic Gardening** – ed *Basil Caplan*.

MORE INFORMATION???

For further information on this topic or on any other Environment issue contact:-

Environment & Heritage Service
Corporate Communications
Commonwealth House
35 Castle Street
BELFAST BT1 1GU
Tel: (028) 9054 6533
Web: www.ehsni.gov.uk/education/factsheets.shtml

Or contact the Warden at any Country Park or Countryside Centre.



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