

How to make your own compost

Compost – often dubbed ‘black gold’ – is soil-conditioning fertiliser for your garden. Here’s what you need to know

All living things die, decompose and become earth. The principle of composting is to help that process. When the bacteria in the compost bin feed on oxygen to break down waste, this ‘aerobic’ process results in a substance rich in nitrogen and other plant nutrients.

This makes a compost heap hot (you can help by turning its contents), which will kill harmful bacteria and weed seeds.

Without oxygen, bacteria feed on nitrogen. This ‘anaerobic’ process produces compost that’s low in nitrogen but still useful for improving soil texture, although weed seeds can survive.

Placing a compost bin on grass or soil allows easy access

“A compost bin on grass or soil allows easy access by micro-organisms

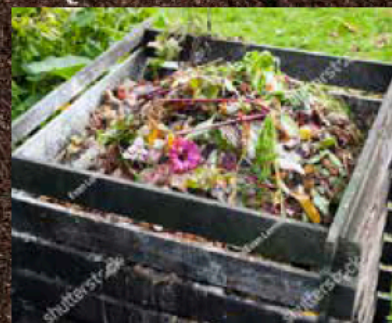
by micro-organisms. You can make one using a square frame of wooden pallets, with stakes at the corners. Wrap chicken wire round the sides, add your waste and top it with old carpet. When the compost is ready, cut away a section of the wire at the bottom, then replace it once you’ve removed the compost.

You can buy ready-made wood or plastic bins in many designs. If your bin will be in view, you might want to pay for a more attractive option.

What goes in the compost bin?

The RHS recommends 25%-50% ‘green waste’ – soft, leafy, green material such as grass clippings, weeds, prunings, fruit and veg scraps – and 75%-50% ‘brown waste’ – dry, woody material, hedge trimmings, dead stems, straw and torn-up or shredded paper and cardboard.

This mix sets the right carbon/nitrogen ratio – brown waste carbon-rich, green waste nitrogen-rich. As a rule of thumb, cut everything into



pieces no thicker than your... thumb. Your compost will be ready in six months to two years. Turning it regularly will speed up decomposition. When it’s ready, compost is dark brown, crumbly and dry, with a texture like soil. It’s usual to have some uncomposted bits; simply put them back in the bin.

If you have no garden, how about a wormery? These contain special worms that digest raw food waste and small amounts of cooked food and garden waste.

Alternatively, bokashi bins (‘bokashi’ is Japanese for ferment) will take all types of food waste, topped with a layer of bran with beneficial micro-organisms.

Wormeries and bokashi bins produce a small amount of compost, which can be used on potted plants, as well as a nutrient-rich liquid that is an excellent plant food.

the meadow supported three times more species of plants and insects. It also saved carbon emissions due to reduced mowing and fertilisation, and reflected more sunlight than the lawn, helping to cool the city.

Alternatively, consider adding in plants that need less looking after, such as red creeping thyme or camomile or clover.

Avoid artificial grass

Don’t be tempted by fake grass if your lawn is hard to maintain.

Covering the ground with a layer of plastic is bad for the environment, smothering worms and preventing water absorption.

It also tends to get very hot to walk on when the sun shines, you have to vacuum up fallen leaves and other debris (nature can’t tidy up for you) and it retains the smell of dog urine.

The microplastics artificial lawns shed also contaminate soil, impede drainage and risk flooding. And once installed, it lasts only around a decade and cannot be recycled.

There was a surge of interest in artificial grass during the Covid lockdown, when people were spending a lot more time in their own backyards, but demand has fallen since then. And its use at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show has been banned since 2022.

But with a little effort, you’re likely to enjoy your lawn more, whether it’s a close-cropped sward worthy of the England First XI, flowery drifts of prairie-style planting – or something in between. 🌱