

sustainable illawarra

fact sheet - waste



Composting

What can be composted

Almost anything that was once part of a plant or animal can be composted e.g. food scraps, newspaper, grass, prunings, manures and weeds. Dog and cat manures are best buried in the garden as they can be a source of parasites, or alternatively, a special worm farm can be purchased for your dog manure and will produce a rich compost for your garden.

The ADAM principles

There are many ways of producing good compost at home, all are based on the principles of ADAM.

Aliveness — a compost heap is a living system.

Diversity — the greater the diversity of material the richer the product.

Aeration — more air means less smell.

Moisture — the heap should be as moist as a lightly squeezed sponge.

How to make compost

Setting up

- Choose a composting system that suits you - an open heap, an enclosure or a compost bin (with lots of air holes).
- Choose a site that receives good sunlight.
- Select a well-drained location.
- Begin with a 10-15 cm layer of twigs, sticks and dry leaves for drainage and aeration.

Collecting materials

- Gather a range of organic materials including some manures as they are a compost's favourite food.
- To make a hot compost (compost that reaches temperatures over 60 C) gather all the materials at once. For most households, it will be easier to build the compost heap week by week.
- Keep a sealed bucket in the kitchen for food scraps eg. coffee grounds, tea bags and vegetable peelings. You can also collect any liquids from the kitchen (left over drinks, rinsing water, etc.).
- Keep grass clippings, raked leaves, etc. in piles so you can add them in layers.

Adding materials

- Add the organic materials (each layer no more than 10 cm thick), alternating between nitrogen rich (food scraps, manure etc.) and nitrogen poor (twigs, dry leaves etc.).
- Ensure each layer is as wet as a lightly squeezed sponge.
- Occasionally add a thin (3-5 cm) layer of soil to keep microbe levels up. Add a sprinkling of lime, dolomite or wood ash after layers of manure and food.
- Cover the heap with a hessian sack.



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When the heap is full

- If you have built the heap all in one go, leave it for two weeks to "cook", then turn it every week. You should have compost ready to use in eight to ten weeks.
- If you have built the heap gradually, you have two options when the heap is full:
 - 1) start a second heap, leaving the first to break down; or
 - 2) remove the enclosure from the heap and relocate it next to the original heap. Start the new heap by forking the top uncomposted material into the enclosure. The finished compost at the bottom of the original heap, is ready to use.

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Where to use compost

Compost adds vitality to the soil and can be used anywhere in your garden. Your energy rich compost will help retain water in sandy soil, improve drainage in clay soil and can help to prevent disease in your garden by keeping your plants healthy.

Compost can be used in many ways around your garden:

- potting mix for raising seed.
- a fertiliser for container plants, ornamental shrubs or trees.
- top dressing for lawns
- soil for your vegetable garden



Solving Composting Problems

Problem	Cause	Solution
Bad odours	Heap is too wet	Add more dry materials such as dry leaves
	Not enough air	Turn the heap to improve drainage and aeration Add 250g of garden lime Cover the heap
Slow decay	Not enough nutrients	Add a small amount of nitrogen-based material (eg. blood & bone fertiliser)
	Not enough air	Turn the heap more often
	Not enough water	Moisten the heap
	Too cold in winter	Cover the heap with insulation material (such as hessian or carpet) Place the heap in direct sunlight
Maggots	Meat, seafood, fats or faeces in the heap	Remove the cause Cover the maggots with lime Add soil to the top of the heap Turn the heap the next day
Mice & rats	Excess bread in the heap	Put fine wire mesh underneath the bin/heap Turn the heap regularly
	Heap is too dry	Moisten the heap

Sources: Recycling in your garden—Mulching and composting, Low Waste Gardening, Leaflet 4, Friends of the Earth (Sydney), 1998.

Don't rubbish Green Waste—Mulch, Compost, Worm Farms, NSW Environment Protection Authority, May, 1997

Further Information

Kiama Municipal Council (business hours) 4232 0444

Shellharbour City Council (business hours) 4221 6111

Wollongong City Council (business hours) 4227 7111

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