

On the Scrap Heap

The garbage many of us put out on the sidewalk for collection could contain the best gift we can give the garden.

Broccoli stems, grass clippings, old newspapers and dryer lint are just some of the ingredients that can go into the compost. A well made pile richly deserves the "brown gold" label many composting fans give it. It's rich in nutrients and provides excellent aeration and drainage for soil.

Compost is a general term for organic material that's broken down by bacteria and other organisms into a rich, crumbly tilth that will give your soil a huge hit of nutrition. The secret to getting compost that way lies in the layering of the right material, keeping it moist and turning it over occasionally to give it air.

What's good for compost? You can try grass clippings with no herbicides, chopped up leaves, and garden waste such as seedless weeds, tomato and squash vines. Ground up wood chips, coffee grounds, sawdust and dried blood meal work well, as does finely chopped kitchen waste. You can run this through a food processor for the best result. If you add a little water, you're contributing to the moisture necessary for a good compost pile.

More of the good stuff includes manure and peat moss, leaf mould, fireplace ashes, feathers, dryer lint, finely chopped corn cobs, non-glossy or waxed shredded paper, pet hair (and your hair) and shredded, black and white newspaper.

You should avoid putting into your compost anything that will attract flies and animals. This will include ingredients like meat, bones and anything from the barbecue, as well as dairy products and cat and dog feces. Garden clippings that have pesticides, herbicides or other toxic chemicals on them should be given a wide berth, as should plant material that might be sick or blighted, and anything else that isn't bio-degradable.

There are many types of composters on the market today, but use one that's good for the size of your garden and will be relatively easy to fill. Even if you're in an apartment with a balcony, or have a tiny yard, you can use a plastic garbage can with small holes poked in the sides. With more space, you can use one bin to store material and another to make the actual heap.

Proper layering is essential for a good end result. If you put nothing but kitchen leftovers into a pile, or nothing but leaves, you'll probably end up with a horrible smell as gases build up.

Layering about six inches of one material, such as well chopped kitchen waste over six inches of another, like shredded leaves or garden clippings (you can run your lawn mower over them), leads to a build-up of heat that literally cooks the smell out. A well made compost will have a pleasant, slightly earthy aroma. If you do notice a bad odour, add extra organic material like leaves or grass clippings, or throw some soil on top.

A compost heap needs good drainage, so you don't want to build on something like a concrete pad where the water won't be able to run off. The sun should hit the heap at some point during the day, but if it's placed in full sun it will rapidly dry out.

During really hot weather it will probably be necessary to water it, but when there's lots of rain a plastic cover will prevent the compost from becoming water logged. In winter too, a plastic cover will trap the heat and keep the mixture working. An ideal mixture should be as damp as a well wrung rag, with an internal temperature of about 70 degrees C to kill off disease, weed seeds and insect eggs.

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