

Gardening

Recycling Your Garden

Autumn sees the end of the main growing season and the start of dormant winter months, with most plants dying back leaving you with a lot of tidying up to do. Clearing up your flowerbeds produces a large amount of unwanted vegetation which needs removing.

If you have deciduous trees around your garden, the accumulation of fallen leaves will play havoc with your grass and plants, as well as your back as you rake them up. Put them to good use by creating leaf mould – a beneficial enriching additive for your soil.

To make leaf mould, poke some holes in the sides and base of a black bin liner and put the leaves into it. When almost full, shake the bag, add a little water if the leaves are dry, and tie up the bag. Stack in a shady spot and by next autumn the leaves will have broken down to a rich crumbly mixture that can be used as a mulch or soil conditioner. Most leaves can be turned into leaf mould but some take longer to decay than others. Deciduous leaves are the quickest to decay, while evergreens take between two and three years to break down so are best added in small quantities or shredded first to help speed up the composting process.

For the other waste in your garden, now is the time to increase your composting capabilities by getting a compost bin, or more than one if you have the room. Composting sites can be designed to suit gardens of all sizes. You can build your own or choose from a range of specially designed bins available at garden centres or mail-order outlets. Some local councils even offer subsidised compost bins and even the smallest patio can accommodate a wormery. You can make a compost heap yourself by literally setting aside an area and just heaping up the rubbish. Cover with polythene or cardboard to speed up the decomposition process and prevent wind from blowing the material around. However specially made bins are neater, easier to manage and more efficient. Basically the ideal compost heap or bin is easily accessible, has a lid or cover, located in a sunny or semi-shaded and placed directly onto the ground well away from watercourses.

Considering that compost is created from old, rotting vegetation, amongst other things, the finished product is remarkably fragrant, rich, dark and crumbly and is a valuable addition to your soil as well as a great method of recycling waste items.

So, what can you compost? A healthy compost heap combines soft green plant and vegetable matter with dry woody materials in roughly even quantities. Adding a few larger woody items ensures air can circulate easily so that the compost decomposes more easily. Keep adding to the pile and turn regularly, adding a little water if it looks dry. When the compost is ready the heap will be half its original size and smell wonderfully earthy.



The main aim is not to let one material dominate the heap, for example, too many grass clippings can make the compost slimy and foul. You can solve this problem by removing the slimy layer then add bulky materials such as straw, shredded hedge clippings or even crumpled newspaper.

Composting comprises a mix of 'green' and 'brown' materials. 'Greens' are nitrogen-rich ingredients that encourage the growth of leaves and stems and speed up the decomposition rate by heating up the heap. They include grass cuttings, fruit and vegetable scraps from your kitchen, old cut flowers, soft green prunings and any plant or weed remains. Make sure the plants you add are not diseased and that weeds do not have seeds on otherwise you will just perpetuate the weed problem. If in doubt leave them out, or send them to your local council waste recycling facility.

'Browns' are carbon rich materials that slow the composting process down and ensure a good quality result. They include such items as teabags and coffee grounds, straw and animal bedding from vegetarian animals such as cows, horses or family pets, poultry manure and bedding, woody prunings and even cardboard and paper in small quantities. It's better to put most papers out in your recycling bin but you may use items such as egg boxes, cereal packets and shredded confidential papers if you have too many 'greens' and kitchen scraps.

Do not compost any cooked food, coal ash, cat and dog litter, disposable nappies, meat and fish, glossy magazines or invasive perennial weeds like bindweed.

You may even consider hiring a shredder or chipper to break down woody clippings or branches. You can either add these chippings to your compost heap or use them as a mulch - much cheaper than buying ready bagged chippings from a garden centre. Chop or shred tough prunings before adding to your compost heap or even pile large quantities separately as they will rot down eventually, although it may take some years. If you have a good compost heap with evenly matched ingredients and warm conditions your compost will be ready in approximately two to four months whereas a heap left unattended and using bulkier material may take over a year to fully decompose. Either way, what a superb way to recycle your waste and add nutrients to your garden!

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