

Home Gardening Made Easy

Workshops in applying ecological principles
to growing tasty, nutritious food

A Guide to Making HUMUS rich Compost.

The focus of making compost is about making good humus, not recycling "waste".

Making compost is like making a lasagna (layers of ingredients) and using a "starter bug" like in yoghurt.

The keys to making a good quality, humus rich compost:

1. Build the heap in one session (see note at end about using vege scraps, etc). This will then take 3 months to be ready for use.
2. Use as many different ingredients as you can.
3. Make sure there is enough air in the heap.
4. Keep the heap at the right moisture level. It is easy to either under or over-water it.
5. Make sure you have a good source of mirco-organisms and worms.

Ingredients:

1. "Dry" Vegetation (mature material) to provide carbon (basis of humus)

- Leaves (esp. from leaf fall in autumn)
- dry grass & weeds (e.g. hay)
- old garden waste
- straw {grain stalks after grain(seed) harvested}
- dry vegetative material from plants after seed is harvested
e.g. corn stalks; legume (broad bean, bean & pea) vines

2. "Green" Vegetation (immature material) to provide nutrients for micro-organisms & plants

- Fresh grass & weeds
- Green cover crops
- Hedge Trimmings, etc
- Kitchen waste

and/or Animal Manure

3. Soil to contribute to the micro-organism "starter", help keep down flies, etc. & "smells" and help the heap have a stable water content.

4. "Starter Bug" of Micro-organisms and food for them

- Concentrated Humus; mature compost, soil under leaf litter under trees, etc
- Animal manure (solid or liquid)
- Liquid Fish Fertilizer (if animal manure not available)

5. Worms

Building the Compost Heap Step-By-Step:

1. You will need an area of at least one meter square. A location that allows for the heap to maintain an even temperature and moisture level over time is best.
2. Loosen the soil to 25 cm deep with a spading fork, over this area.
3. Lay down rough material (twigs, small branches, corn stalks, etc) 10-15 cm thick, for good drainage and air circulation.
4. Make your compost (lasagna) layers
 - a. Put down a 4-8 cm layer of dry vegetation (i.e. mature material). Water well.
 - b. Put down a 4-8 cm layer of green vegetation, etc (i.e. immature material). Water well.
 - c. Cover lightly with a 2-4 cm layer of soil.
 - d. Repeat a to c until the heap is at least 1 m high.
5. Cover the top of the pile with a 4-6 cm layer of soil.
6. If building the compost heap in one session you can then monitor its temperature for the first 3-4 weeks to ensure all is working well. After this you can "turn the heap" once for faster ongoing decomposition, if you feel it is needed.
7. Water the compost heap as needed, to keep it moist (check the moisture in the middle of the heap occasionally).
8. In 3 to 6 months, it will be ready to use. At this time most of the original ingredients will be unrecognisable, it will have a fresh and woodsy like smell and it will be dark brown to black with a soft and crumbly structure.

Applying the mature compost to the garden:

For planning purposes, a 1 m high on a base of 1 m x 1 m (1 cubic meter) compost heap will be 30 cm high when it is ready to use, giving you 1/3 of a cubic meter of compost for your garden.

The compost should be evenly spread over the garden area in a layer that is at least 2 cm deep and then lightly dug into the soil.

(Note: Sometimes people choose to build a compost heap over time as a way of using up kitchen scraps on a regular basis. This will take at least 6 months from start to finish and has limitations. If you take this approach you need to as an absolute minimum make at least one series of "3 layers" each time. It is generally better to accumulate kitchen waste in a "holding situation" then use it all when building the compost heap in one session).