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# FOOD SCRAPS to compost



## Composting made easy

Are you thinking of starting your own composting system? Here are some useful tips and information about how to get started and maintain your compost system.

### The essentials

Each compost system requires:

1. air
2. water
3. a diverse range of ingredients
4. insects and micro-organisms to aid the break down of ingredients. These could include worms, insects such as slaters, beetles, millipedes, spiders, slugs, snails, mites, flies and micro-organisms including bacteria, fungi and protozoa.

### What can we compost?

Nitrogen rich materials (usually green and wet) including:

- food scraps such as vegetable and fruit peels
- leaves
- fresh grass clippings
- egg shells, coffee grounds, tea leaves
- manure (cow, sheep, horse, rabbit, chook or pigeon)
- some weeds and non-woody plants and pruning's (e.g. tomato bushes that have been harvested).

Carbon rich materials (usually brown and dry) including:

- thinly torn or shredded newspaper (no glossy pages)
- cardboard and egg cartons
- straw
- dry leaves and cut up dead plants.

### What shouldn't we compost?

You should never compost inorganic material or contaminants including:

- plastic bags
- wrappers
- cartons
- meat and dairy products (These attract rodents, and meat products take a long time to break down in home composting systems. However, these are fine for your green organics bin.)
- dog and cat manure
- invasive weeds such as sour sobs, nut or couch or weeds with seeds
- woody branches.



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## Composting systems – compost bay options

You can use pallets, non-treated timber, mesh wire or concrete blocks to create a compost system. Alternatively, here are some other options:

### Black plastic bins

These are usually cone shaped and can be purchased from hardware stores. It is best to have at least four bins with different stages of decomposing taking place.

### Tumblers

These are barrels supported by a frame which rotate. They can produce compost within three weeks.

### Worm farms

Container options include polystyrene boxes, plastic tiered systems, old de-gassed fridges and old bathtubs.

### Liquid compost

In a tub or bucket, add one part compost to three parts water and stir occasionally. This can be used on your garden after three days.

## How to set up a compost system using black bins or compost bays:

1. Place the bin or bay on soil (not concrete). This allows drainage and for insects and worms to enter.
2. Start by adding a 10-15cm layer of twigs or plant stems, this will allow some air flow.
3. Add any of the ingredients listed in **'What can we compost?'** alternating layers of carbon rich (brown/dry) materials with nitrogen rich (green/wet) materials.
4. Try and add at least twice the amount of the carbon rich materials as nitrogen rich ones and keep the layers thin (no more than 20cm).

## How do we use humus?

Humus is the finished product of the composting process. It is a dark rich colour and has a sweet smell.

Humus can be thinly spread over your garden beds, or soaked in water in a container, strained and poured around plants using a watering can. Your garden will thank you!



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## Some hints for no-fail composting

- Have at least three bays: one that is 'brewing', one to add materials to on a regular basis and one for storage of green non-woody material.
- The more bays or bins, the better. This means you will have different stages of decomposing material, some ready for use, some just starting.
- Keep the system moist (but not saturated) by adding a watering can full of water over every dry/brown layer.
- Cut or chop up bushy materials into small pieces before adding. This can reduce the duration of decomposing to as little as 4-6 weeks from start to finish.
- When starting each new bin or bay, add some existing compost, soil or compost worms. This will help speed up the process.
- Allow air to circulate through the system by occasionally turning the compost with a fork or adding a staked drainage pipe upright in the centre.
- Store excess food scraps in a bucket with a lid before adding to the compost, this will prevent smell. Ideally choose a location which will have some shade in summer.
- In summer, place hessian bags or old wool carpet over the top of the open system (bays) to prevent drying out. Add water if the centre has dried out.

## Problem Solving

### Rats and mice (in the open bay system)

Always add dry material or soil over fresh food scraps, this will deter rodents. With black bins, place chicken wire under them before installing and keep the lid on.

### Ants

It's too dry, add water.

### Smells, is soggy or slimy

Usually too many food scraps (stop adding) or too wet (cover the open bays with black plastic). Add some handfuls of gardening lime or dolomite.

### Decay too slow

Needs aerating or is too wet or dry. Not enough micro-organisms (add some rich compost or compost worms) or not enough variety of ingredients.