

# Frequently Asked Composting Questions



## **Q: Can weeds be composted?**

A: In slow cold composting conditions, weeds, especially weeds with seeds, can survive. To compost annual weeds, it is best to pick them before they go to seed. If you'd like to compost dandelions that are beginning to flower, simply remove the flower tops, add them to the compost bin and be sure to cut up the tap root up with your secateurs. For perennial weeds that spread by root or runner, such as bindweed or scutch grass, if you can dry them out completely in the sun, they can be added to your heap. Otherwise keep these types of weeds out of your compost pile. Invasive weeds, such as docks, horsetail or Japanese Knotweed should not be composted at all. In a hot composting system when a big batch is made all at once, weeds with seeds and chopped up perennial weeds that spread by root can be composted effectively, but achieving temperatures in excess of 60°C requires careful management and turning of the materials so everything is exposed to high heat conditions for effective weed destruction.

## **Q: Can ashes from the fire, stove or BBQ be composted?**

A: Ashes should not be added to your compost system because they fill in air spaces needed to promote adequate aeration. Additionally, they are alkaline in nature and can upset the near neutral pH balance of your compost heap. However, wood and peat ashes do contain potassium, a valuable plant nutrient, and can be directly added to acidic soils at planting time to help increase fertility. Coal ashes may contain heavy metals and other toxins so they should not be used for gardening.

## **Q: Can I compost pet waste?**

A: Waste from herbivore plant eating pets, such as rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils and birds, can be safely composted at home. Pet waste from meat eating pets such as dogs and cats should not be composted for use in the garden because of the potential to spread disease. Instead, cat litter can be placed into your black rubbish bin or dog faeces can be flushed down the toilet.

## **Q: Should I purchase a compost activator?**

A: You do not need to buy an activator or inoculant to start your compost pile. All of the bacteria you need are already on the materials you want to compost. You simply need to create the right conditions for them to take off and proliferate.

## **Q: Is there anything I can do to speed up the composting process?**

A: Yes. Chopping up materials into smaller pieces, properly balancing green and brown materials, turning the pile to increase aeration and ensuring the compost heap remains damp, not too wet yet not too dry, will all speed up the composting process.

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## **Q: Should I cover my composting system or heap?**

A: In rainy Ireland, covering your composter is a great idea. During the winter, a cover stops the materials becoming waterlogged. In summer months, covering the pile keeps moisture in. Remember to monitor the contents of your bin to ensure it does not dry out, especially during drier summer months.

## **Q: How can I stop flies from swarming from my composting system?**

A: Flies are attracted to rotting food on top of your heap. To avoid this, be sure to mix and bury your food scraps within the pile. Then add a layer of mixed garden materials or wet leaves on top. If this problem persists during winter months when garden materials are not available, mix the food into the existing materials and place a layer of wet newspaper on top to create a physical barrier. Also be sure to collect food scraps in a covered container within your kitchen. This will prevent flies from laying eggs into the food prior to you adding them to your composter.

## **Q: My compost heap smells bad. What can I do?**

A: There are a few reasons why your composting system may smell, including:  
The composting materials are too wet

- It contains too high a proportion of green materials such as grass cuttings or food scraps
- It contains food scraps with animal products such as meat, fish, skins, or dairy products
- In the case of the first two, the solution is similar- turn the compost and add some drier brown materials and mix thoroughly. If the compost is getting wet due to rain, then be sure to cover the system.
- If you are putting meat or other materials of animal origin into the food scraps to be composted, these could be causing the smell. Collect only plant derived food scraps for composting and consider using a brown bin collection service for animal based food scraps and other difficult to manage garden materials such as woody materials and noxious or invasive weeds.

## **Q: Does my compost need to be turned?**

A: No, not necessarily. Many bins work by simply adding materials to the top while harvesting compost out of the bottom. Turning allows you to add air and if necessary, moisture to speed up composting. If the opening of the compost bin is too narrow to turn the pile, simply lift the bin up off the compost, place it next to the composting materials and turn them back into the bin. You can also purchase a spiral compost mixer that acts like a giant corkscrew to mix things up within the bin as well.

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## **Q: The material in the composter looks very dry and seems to be doing nothing. What should I do?**

A: If the materials in your composting system dry out, composting stalls. Simply add and mix in water to get it going again. Once the materials are moist enough, you can continue to add fresh materials to your bin. Be sure to chop, mix and water garden materials prior adding them to your bin.

## **Q: There are lots of worms around the lid of my compost unit. Is there something wrong?**

A: Worms in your bin are a good sign. Worms naturally make their way to the lid of the compost bin so don't worry- they will make their own way back down when they want to.

## **Q: Are rodents a problem when composting?**

A: Yes, they can be, but not if you actively manage your composting system properly. Rodents come to composters looking for food or a place to nest, especially in winter months. They will be attracted by food scraps that are easily accessible, such as those that are placed on the top of your pile, or to any high protein items such as meat, fish, bones or cheese. Compost piles can also be a warm and dry home for nesting. If you find that rats are nesting in your bin, you can simply turn the pile to disrupt nesting behavior. To discourage rodents, bury food scraps within composting materials, avoid composting food containing animal products, secure the bottom of the composter with wire mesh, and place it within a well-visited area of the garden.

## **Q: How long does it take to make finished compost?**

A: This depends on the system you use, the types of material composted and whether or not you are following all of the basic essentials of composting. In general, if you are using a single bin system, you can expect that any materials you add in one gardening season will be ready the following year. As the compost within a bin will be older as you go down, you can harvest the compost by taking the bin apart and setting it up again next to the composting materials. Then you can fork the fresher materials from the top into the newly placed bin until you get to the finished compost underneath. This helps kick start your new pile and gives you materials in which you can bury your food scraps into.

## **Q: Why is my compost taking a long time to decompose?**

A: This may be caused by adding too much brown material or material which is too large in size. To solve this problem, shred the material and add more green materials. Another cause may be that the compost is too dry. If this is the case, then simply add and mix in some water.

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## **Q: There are a lot of weed seedlings when I spread out the compost. Why?**

A: Weed seeds can survive in most composting piles unless a large hot pile is made all at once and you can reach temperatures in excess of 60°C for more than three days. The best solution is to avoid adding weeds with seeds to your composting system in the first place. This can be done if you pick weeds from your garden before they go to seed. This will prevent weeds from germinating from the finished compost you produce and use around your home. If you have weedy compost, simply dig it in deep within the soil so that germinating seeds cannot reach the surface.