



COOKING UP COMPOST

The secret to good gardening is good soil and the secret to good soil is compost.

Compost making has been part of my routine wherever I have lived. Saving the kitchen waste and transforming garden refuse is a part of the gardening cycle and as important as harvesting and food preparation. When moving house, the compost heap has moved with me.

There have also been many 'collecting missions', raking, bagging and loading, 'mucking 'manure in the middle of a paddock, picking up leaves and collecting seaweed. However, there is no need to travel far to collect 'exotic 'materials. Most of the basic materials can be found at home and transformed into Black Magic (good compost). Here are some tips to head you in the right direction and help you on the road to transforming waste that is often headed to landfill.

This is the story of how I like to make compost.

Step 1: Making the most of your household and garden waste

The starting point is the kitchen. I keep a compost collection system in the house that includes a bucket for kitchen waste, a pot for coffee grinds and a bowl for the best waste product. Each of these items feeds different parts of the garden recycle system.

1: Kitchen Scraps

Vegetable refuse is put into a kitchen bucket. This is emptied into the cool compost bins where it is layered with other organic material to make rich worm filled humus. Chop up chunky hard material - this will help to speed decomposition and enhance worm action.

2: Coffee Grounds

These are collected in a small tub then spread in different parts of the garden. Sometimes I add them to the worm farm and sometimes to the Cool Compost Bin. Used coffee grinds help sweeten the compost mix and provide grit for the worms that are working hard to transform decomposing waste. I also use coffee grinds to help control snails - a sprinkle around the base of small plants will repel them. Snails and slugs detest the caffeine and dislike the gritty nature of the coffee.

3: Best Waste

These are the juicy bits from the kitchen like fruit peelings, cucumber ends, watermelon and the discards or soft parts of veggies that are past their prime. All are headed to the Worm Farm and will be devoured by these happy little garden workers.



We do not eat meat in our household, so we do not need to dispose of greasy, fatty or meaty items. I know this material can attract rodents and maggots. I would be hesitant to use it. However, if you have a closed system that you are sure will keep the vermin out then I can see no issue, provided you manage the process properly. When you consider it, next to compost and aged manure, one of the best organic additives to the garden is blood and bone.

Step 2: Collecting Other Composting Materials

1: Shredded Newspaper and Office Paper

I collect paper to rip and shred to add to the compost and use in the Worm Farm and as mulch on the garden under straw. I rip a basket of newspaper into shreds then use it in a layer on the compost or over a garden bed under straw mulch. Worms and critters like the dark damp environment and a layer of this will keep your soil activated between crops. I also use the same material when I am making a stepping trail in the garden. The cushioned layer will help by reducing compaction and over time will add to the humus layer in the soil.

2: Cardboard

I collect cardboard to use as a base for compost bins and the bottom of the hot mix enclosure. The cardboard is a great material for creating a temporary barrier between the natural ground level and the new mix. Cardboard – especially the corrugated variety - is liked by worms, they hide in the corrugations and ingest the damp fine fibers, transforming the material into castings. Worms also use the corrugated tunnels as a refuge for breeding. Cardboard is excellent for suppressing weeds, if you are trying to reclaim an area that is grassy or weedy, a thick layer of dampened cardboard covered by shredded paper, sprinkles of manure mix then straw is a great starter – a horizontal compost treatment that will soften the soil in preparation for a new garden bed.

3: Aged Manure

Chicken, cow, sheep, horse, elephant, whatever type takes your fancy! Some manures are better than others, but all should be aged. I like to add manure as a layer to the compost mix. It acts as a catalyst to bring the heat up, introduces natural organic materials high in nitrogen and balances the compost. Good, aged manure is excellent for top dressing beds between crops. Beware of the source of your manure. Some manures are filled with chemicals... traced to the worming regime that is necessary for responsible animal husbandry. It is essential to age manure or set it through a composting cycle to deplete the chemicals from the source. The medicines used to kill the intestinal worms in animals will also kill your garden and composting worms.

4: Lawn Clippings and Shredded Garden Waste

Lawn Clippings and finely shredded garden waste are one of the most underutilized green waste elements from our home garden environment. The fine clippings are magnificent as a compost accelerator and when decomposed make a beautifully textured compost material. The secret is to not place them in a thick layer where they will become gluggy, mix them in layers with straw and leafy matter, the heat generated will help break the rougher material down and in a matter of no time you will have a great humus mix.

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5: Straw:

I have a delivery of straw three to four times a year, around 30 bales with each delivery. If you have the space, store a mini hay-stack, it is more economical to purchase in larger lots. You can use bales around the garden for other things – try them for some temporary raised beds, or arrange as a hay bale bench seat, or best of all as a stack for children to climb and jump from. I swear by the benefits of straw and use it as a 'teased mulch' or as 'biscuits' in and around plants.

Beware though, rotting straw robs nitrogen from the soil. Always place a good sprinkling of pelletised manure under the mulch layer to counterbalance the natural organic depletion (remember when the material is rotted then the nitrogen is released back to the plants). Many people swear by pea straw. I am not fussy; I am happy with barley straw or oaten straw) – any grains that shoot add green manure to the garden and keep the chooks amused.

Step 3: Three Different ways to Making Compost

1: Hot Compost Pile – takes 6 to 8 weeks:

The Hot Compost heap makes the greatest quantity and is the quickest method. With careful management a large pile of mixed waste can be transformed in a matter of 6 to 8 weeks. It requires an area approximately 1m x 1m. This is recommended as the perfect area. I use hay bales to make the enclosure – this offers flexibility and means I can build a heap where I want to make a new bed or revitalize an old one. The secret is building up the layers. Layering can happen over a period of about 3 to 4 weeks. You will need a supply of shredded green waste (lawn clippings and shredded garden refuse) – teased straw – manure – leaves – garden waste such as weeds with a little soil attached to roots. You might also include ash from the wood fire, tealeaves, coffee grinds, shredded newspaper and cardboard. The above material is built up like layers in a cake, thicker layers of dry material to thinner layers of moist material.

You **MUST** water your compost heap. Heat generation and decomposition creates dry pockets in the heap and will slow the process. After you have built up a heap aerate the top layer lightly with a fork and put your hand down into the center to measure the heat. The aim is to have it so hot is it uncomfortable to put your hand into for a long period. This is also a sign that it is time to turn the heap. Build an adjoining enclosure of bales and simply transfer the pile into its new location. You can stimulate more heat by adding a little more manure and lightly wetting the mix. Add a deep layer of straw over the top to capture the heat, like a winter duvet or quilt. After about two weeks this process can be repeated. Each time you turn the pile it will generate heat. After 3 or 4 turns it will offer you a wonderful humus for spreading on the garden.

2: Cool Compost Bin – takes 4 to 6 months but can be built up over 12 months:

This is the traditional bin that opens at the top and sits directly on the earth at the base. People often have problems with these bins, especially when their waste sours. Well managed they can offer a rich source of organic matter.



The secret to success of closed bins is time and layering. With a little work they will offer you a rich source of humus.

1: Place your open bottomed bin in a convenient spot. Somewhere on your way to the car – or to hang out the washing, along a trail you travel everyday. You will be making this journey regularly – put it somewhere that is pleasant to visit in the garden.

2: Begin by lining the base with cardboard or shredded paper, next add layers, especially the kitchen scraps. If you want to vermin proof the bin place a layer of chicken wire or similar at ground level before you begin. Try and have a number of active bins so you can alternate where you dispose of waste. Always place a handful of coffee grinds then a layer of straw or dry leaves mixed with shredded newspaper over the top of the sloppy waste. A handful of manure over the top of this will assist in generating heat in the bin. Layering is important as it evenly distributes wet and dry and will prevent the heap from souring. An occasional stir with the garden fork will aerate the mix. An alternative is to purchase a compost twirler – this tool twists down into the heap and lifts material, distributing air into the decomposing matter and freshening the mix.

3: When the contents are reaching the brim of the bin leave it a while, check for dampness, give an occasional stir and let the bin settle. You will be surprised by the number of worms that will make their way up and through the decomposing waste. This is what you are aiming for, natural decomposition together with worm activity works to transform kitchen sludge into rich humus.

4: When the bin is ready remove the top and transfer the top third of the mix into the bottom of the bin in its next location. This is your compost starter. A little like yeast to bread, the starter will make an excellent base for your new bin and will mean you may not have to wait so long to harvest the contents. Make sure you also transfer the worms.

3: The Worm Farm – once established this is ongoing:

A great way of improving your garden is to use one of nature's wonder creatures, worms will transform 'tasty morsels' from your kitchen into rich worm castings and juice to super charge your soil. My Worm Farm is one purchased for my father as a gift over 15 years ago – a hardware store purchased item it has been in heavy production since I moved here to Arundel. I save the best kitchen waste for the worm farm and through trial and error have developed a system that works for me.

I have a base and three trays. The base with legs (bottom layer) has a tap attached and is where worm juice runs into. A bucket is in permanent 'open' position under the tap to catch the runoff nutrients. I use one scoop to a bucket or watering can of water and put this out over veggies, often mixed with seaweed fertilizer as a 'garden tonic'.

The next two layers are filter layers. Shredded newspaper and straw are spread and act to catch the moisture that is dripping from the top layer. This also means that the base is never blocked with a buildup of worm castings (a problem I have had in the past).

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The layer closest to the top can be quite damp and covered with worm castings. This layer also acts as a filter and will eventually be transferred to the top.

The very top layer has the majority of worms and the rotting vegetable material. Worms like soft fruits and vegies. I have discovered overgrown zucchini are a favourite, as is watermelon and banana. Cut fruit and vegetables and place flesh side down, skin side up – they will devour the core of the material very quickly. I also add semi-rotted straw, finely shredded newspaper and coffee grounds and give the mix an occasional light stir.

About every four months (sometimes longer) I take the top layer and set aside on the lid and cover it with a damp hessian sack. I then remove the second layer and empty it onto a worktable. The worms will work their way into the middle of the heap. Start by removing the outer layer and scoop small amounts into a bucket – moving any worms into the middle. Gradually you will have a bucket full of worm castings and a thriving heap of worms trying to find the darkest spot. Move these to your top tray and feed them with some tasty rotting morsels to begin the cycle. Wash the old tray, line it with shredded paper and straw and transfer to the bottom of the stack as a new base filter.

Worms enjoy a dark moist (not wet) environment that is slightly warm – never hot. I use cardboard over the top of the waste then cover them with a 'worm blanket', cap the unit with its lid and place a hessian sack over everything. During summer keep your worm farm in a semi-shaded spot and over winter move it to a place where it catches a little sun. This will keep the worms more active during the colder months.

Transforming kitchen and garden waste into organic compost is rewarding. I am thrilled by the results in this garden and know that the success at Arundel can be directly attributed to the organic material that has been spread across many of the beds.

I have experienced success and failure and over time learned that the making of compost has a few tricks attached. I hope I have shared some of these tricks with you. Compost is the great garden transformer and a wonder product that you can magically make from the material that many people throw in their rubbish.

There is no excuse - Transform that waste – It's Black Magic



Cooking up Compost is located on the lands of the Wadawarrung people. Open Gardens Victoria wish to acknowledge the Traditional custodians and we pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.