

# AN EASY GUIDE TO BETTER COMPOSTING

“Composting is the breakdown of organic matter by bacteria and other organisms into a wonderful black substance called humus.

Almost half of the domestic rubbish going to landfills is organic material which can be composted or reduced to useful mulch. It is imperative that we learn to use our organic wastes simply and effectively so that they become a resource rather than a liability.”<sup>i</sup>

Just follow these four simple principles to create great compost :

**Aeration** - aerobic decomposition involves the break-down of organic materials by micro organisms which thrive in an oxygen rich environment. This can be assisted by placing materials in your compost which assist with aeration (such as small twigs and mulched garden matter). Turning over the materials in your compost on a fortnightly basis will also assist (this can be achieved simply with a garden fork within the container, or by removing the container from the heap and forking back all the materials into the bin). Make sure if you use a compost bin, that it is placed on well drained soil. *Remember, well managed compost will have a rich earthy smell.*

**Diversity** - place as many diverse materials in your bin as possible. As a rule of thumb you can place any materials in your compost which were “once part of a plant or animal”. This includes tea bags, ground coffee, general food scraps, bread, small amounts of soiled paper or cardboard (up to 10% volume), wood ash from a fire, egg shells, garden prunings (cut up into small pieces), cow or chicken manure, as well as soil which can also be sprinkled on to assist with the break down process. Remember when you add vegetables, etc. to chop them into smaller pieces - this increases their surface area and will help them to break down faster! You can even add the soiled cardboard from the occasional pizza box (simply tear it up into small pieces and soak it in water before adding it to your compost).

**Aliveness** - is simply achieved through the micro-organisms within the compost (the heat from their bodies builds up within the heap). In time worms will also help with the break-down process. An initial sprinkle of soil or matured compost will provide the much needed micro-organisms. (It is also a good idea to place your compost bin in a position which enjoys some sunshine).

Note: in the past, there has been a lot of education to place materials in “layers”. This has been encouraged in an effort to create a greater range of materials, though is not necessary if compost is maintained with a regular fortnightly “turn”.

**Moisture** - your compost may need a sprinkle of water on occasions to maintain a certain level of moisture (likened to a damp “wrung out” sponge). A dry compost heap will never break-down, whereas too much water will take up the air spaces.

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## **Adding compost to your soil has enormous benefits:**

- \* it improves soil texture and structure;
- \* it increases the moisture and nutrient holding capacity of soil;
- \* it encourages billions more living organisms to thrive in the soil, which is the key to long term healthy plants;
- \* it brings wonderful worms back to your garden;
- \* you can use compost to enrich all plants you are growing.

## HAVING PROBLEMS WITH YOUR COMPOST?

Check our list of possible problems and simple solutions:

### Smelly compost

**Lack of Diversity** - More variety of ingredients may be required. Try using a compost Activator (e.g. Humilac).

**Lack of Aeration** - increase aeration of compost bin or enclosure (more holes). Alternatively, remake heap with a coarse layer on the bottom, e.g. sticks, leaves, twigs, prunings, etc.

### Process is too slow & cool

**Lack of Aliveness** - check no toxic or poisonous substances are being put in (e.g. chlorine bleaches, or any other household or garden synthetic chemicals). These can kill the microbes and other living things

**Lack of Diversity** - More variety of ingredients (perhaps high in Nitrogen) may be required e.g. Manure, blood & bone. Use a compost Activator.

**Lack of Aeration** - Turn or "fluff up" heap more often. Improve bottom drainage. Add more coarse materials e.g. Twigs, prunings, leaves.

**Lack of Moisture** - mix and add more water if heap is not as moist as a lightly squeezed sponge. Cover surface heap with hessian or newspaper to hold moisture and heat IN.

*N.B. well built compost heaps should get hot (between 40 - 70°C), small bins 40 - 50°C, big bins 50 - 70°C.*

### Mice or cockroaches

**Lack of Diversity** - May be too much bread and meat and not enough other ingredients. Add lime and wood ash more regularly. Always cover food scraps with soil, grass, newspaper.

**Lack of Aeration** - see note above re: Aeration.

**Lack of Moisture** - see note above re: Moisture<sup>ii</sup>.

## OTHER HELPFUL HINTS...

Remember - turning a heap regularly improves aeration and the composting process. This will accelerate the process, is easy once you have a fluffy heap (and only takes a minute or two each week). A good guide is to turn your heap weekly for the first four weeks and then fortnightly thereafter. Compost Activators will also speed up the process (but are otherwise not essential).

If you are just "re-discovering" your compost, it is a good idea to avoid placing any meat or large amounts of dairy products in your compost until you get more experience.

Uses for compost include:

indoor or outdoor plants

around trees and shrubs, flowers or vegetables - even the lawn!

***This information is produced by the City of Burnside in the interests of our environment, waste minimisation, and to encourage better use of our resources.***

References: <sup>i</sup> The Australian compost book, Rutherford, P. & Lamonda, M, Apollo Books, Sydney, 1996.

<sup>ii</sup> The Complete Guide to Compost, Rutherford, P. & Lourie, D, Earth Solutions, NSW, 1995.