Did you know ...

Compost activators - contain 'cultured' strains of bacteria and other additives. The fact is that these special additives are not needed as every piece of material you add to your heap/bin is covered with thousands of nature's natural decomposers, bacteria. That's more than enough to do the job.

Compost boosters - there are a number of suggested additives for boosting compost performance, such as stale beer and soft drinks to increase biological activity. Activity will increase but mostly in the form of ants and flies.

Worms - it has become popular to add worms to compost heaps due to some confusion with worm composting. Worms are extremely beneficial but need not be added or purchased. Just build the heap and they will come if the heap is composting properly.

Fertilisers - adding artificial fertilisers to a heap is expensive, wasteful, and harmful to worms and decomposers. If you have to add nitrogen to a heap because it's made up of all browns such as stalks, then always try and use organic fertilisers such as animal manure or dried blood.

Lime - many composters mistakenly add lime to their heaps to produce neutral compost. Unfortunately, all this does is turn your compost ecosystem into an ammonia factory with the nitrogen being lost as a noxious gas. Mature compost is nearly always near a neutral pH.

Odours - a properly built compost heap will have a small but not unpleasant odour. Strong and unpleasant odours usually result from mistakes like composting grass clippings on their own, adding too many food scraps or the wrong type of foods. Bad odours will also occur if the heap becomes too wet or has too little air.

Animals and pests - adding food scraps to a compost heap will make it more attractive to pests. This is only a problem if it is not managed properly, like dumping them on top of the help for example. In urban areas an enclosed compost bin is the best solution.

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Composting tips

- Air is essential for odour free composting. If necessary a stake or a crowbar can be pushed through the heap to create aeration vents.
- Turn the compost immediately if offensive odours are produced. It is an indication that there is not enough air in the heap.
- Decomposition is faster in the warm summer months than in the winter.
- The compost heap needs to be large enough to insulate itself in order to retain the heat from the activity of the decomposer organisms. A cubic metre or slightly larger is sufficient size for open heaps.

Keep green waste out of the waste stream

Green waste

Grass clippings, hedge trimmings, plant material
The South Taranaki District Council offers a kerbside collection of green waste for a small fee. Ask the Council for more details. Check out the yellow pages for other green waste collectors in your area. Check out your local transfer station for green waste disposal options (charges may apply).

TARANAKI REGIONAL COUNCIL

For more information please contact:
Taranaki Regional Council

47 Cloten Road
Private Bag 713
Stratford

Phone 06 765 7127
Fax 06 765 5097
Web www.trc.govt.nz
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REDUCE YOUR RUBBISH
www.reducerubbish.govt.nz

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The Council acknowledges Christchurch City Council in reproducing this information

Guide to garden composting

for the Taranaki region

TARANAKI REGIONAL COUNCIL

Why compost?

Environmentally, composting makes good sense. It is a simple cost-effective natural way to recycle your kitchen and garden waste materials. It is cheaper than taking these materials to the transfer station and avoids air pollution from burning garden waste.

If you don't already compost TRY IT! It's great fun and helps the environment.

Compost is?

Compost is quite different to the material that it was made from. It is free from unpleasant odours, is easy to handle and can be stored for a long time. It is a natural plant food, soil conditioner and mulch, adds organic matter to the soil and encourages soil life and earthworms. Composting provides the gardener with an excellent material to enrich the soil.

What is composting?

Composting is a natural process in which micro-organisms decay organic material such as plant material, paper, paper napkins and food waste into a soil-like material. These decomposer organisms live all around us and the most important ones are too small for us to see. Bacteria are the prime decomposers in a compost heap and they arrive on every single piece of organic matter. Composting merely controls the conditions so that materials decompose faster.

Materials you can compost

Greens - kitchen vegetable and fruit scraps, vegetable peelings, lawn clippings, green foliage.

Browns - paper, sawdust (untreated), straw, plant stalks, cereal boxes, cardboard, tea leaves, coffee grounds, egg shells, paper napkins, tree clippings, woody materials such as cabbage stalks.

Both kitchen and garden materials will compost much quicker when chipped, chopped or crushed into smaller pieces. Paper napkins, paper and cardboard are best ripped into small pieces and soaked in water prior to composting.

Materials not to be composted

- ✗ Meat, fish, fats or cooking/salad oils as these may create odour and fly problems.
- ✗ Wood, bones, inert materials (such as tins, glass or plastic), or diseased plant material.
- ✗ Plant foliage with residue of chemical sprays, especially hormone type weedkillers.
- ✗ Oxalis and other problem weeds such as live twitch, convolvulus, dock and dandelion.
- ✗ Toxic material in general.

The compost recipe

For peak efficiency you need a good balance of the four basic ingredients: **greens + browns + water + air**

How to Compost

Getting started

It is tidier to make your compost in a bin or container. You can make this yourself at little cost. Alternatively, a number of commercially made compost bins are available. These include plastic and wooden units and compost tumblers.

Choosing the site

Position your compost bin in a sheltered, level area of the garden that has good drainage and access. The site should be within reach of a garden hose, and preferably not in full sun. The compost heap should sit directly on the soil.

Making the compost

- Before positioning the bin, fork over the soil on the site to aid drainage and encourage earthworms into the heap. If using an enclosed container it may be necessary to raise it up on a few bricks.

- Always start with a layer of 100-150 mm of coarse material to ensure good drainage and ventilation. Coarse partly decomposed materials from a previous heap can be used.

- Throw in a bucketful of greens – fruit and vegetable matter, lawn clippings etc, and a bucketful of browns – straw, paper, plant material etc. Don't worry if you don't have all of these ingredients. Add a little water as you go if the materials are dry. Mix, stir and fluff after every few additions for a hard working compost stew. The compost needs to be moist to maintain the consistency of a squeezed out sponge.

- Within a day or two, the heap will heat up and start to shrink. This is the start of the composting process.

- Continue to build the compost heap as materials become available and then cover with soil or plastic sheeting. If using a bin, when the bin is full, cover it with straw, soil, old sacks or similar materials. This helps to retain the heat and keep out flies. Finally fit the lid and leave the compost to mature.

- It's not unusual to have more than one compost bin or heap going at any one time, one resting and one active.

Turning

Decomposition takes time. Turning the heap will speed up the process but is not essential. Composting takes about 3-4 months if the heap is turned. However, if it is not, allow up to 9-12 months for the compost to mature. For optimum results turn the heap once every four to six weeks, ie 3-4 times over 3-4 months. This will aerate the heap, expose fresh material for more rapid decomposition, redistribute the decomposer organisms and allow you to add water if required.

Using your compost

Your compost can be used at any time of the year but for best results it should be dug into the existing soil in the autumn or spring. Dig the compost into the top 50-100 mm of the soil surface to improve soil texture, structure and fertility.

If the compost is quite coarse it may be necessary to sieve it through chicken netting prior to use. Any stalky or woody material removed can then be recycled into the next heap.