



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO COMPOSTING IN TINY SPACES

Why compost?

Whether you want to find more sustainable ways to reduce and reuse household waste, save money on gardening resources or simply give your garden or pot-plants a healthy boost, composting is fantastic habit to create.

Compost will improve the structure, aeration and water retention of your soil, while adding important nutrients and increasing healthy bacterial activity. In other words, compost makes healthy plants.

In addition, when you consider that every Australian household throws away 936 kilograms of food a year, it's nice to think there's a way to turn at least some of that to good, rather than sending it all away in overflowing plastic bin-bags to steaming heaps of rubbish on the outskirts of town.

You don't need to have a farm or an enormous back yard to compost your food waste. Even if you only have a tiny courtyard (like me) or a couple of pot-plants on a balcony, there's a composting system for you.

Following is my simple guide to getting started.

Composting in Tiny Spaces, Naomi Bulger



Step 1: Choose your composting system

I'm going to assume, since you're here, that you don't have space for a traditional free-standing compost bin or compost heap. (If you do, there are some great tips for starting out with those on foodwise.com.au.)

Composting alternatives I've seen that suit much smaller spaces - including apartments - include:

- * Burial systems such as Composting Cannon or Compot, which are buried directly into a garden or pot, so worms can do the work of making the compost
- * Turning systems such as the Tumbleweed Compost Tumbler, which looks (and behaves) a little like a lottery-ball barrel. The food waste is spun every few days to aerate the matter and speed up the process
- * Hungry Bin, a worm-farm on wheels that can be moved about the balcony or garden. Waste is fed into the top and nutrients are extracted from the bottom
- * Bokashi, a Japanese bucket system that uses micro-organisms to actually ferment (pickle) food waste without creating bad smells

Step 2: Gather your set-up ingredients

Depending on the system you choose, you may need to establish layers of "ingredients" in your compost to get started. Other systems, like the buried Composting Cannon that I use, don't require any set-up at all. Without knowing what system you choose it's hard for me to guide you but if want to start preparing, most traditional compost systems need you to set up some layers containing a) brown ingredients (dried leaves and twigs), b) green ingredients (plants, green leaves and grass clippings), and c) dry ingredients (such as shredded newspaper and dry hay or straw).

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These all go in before you start adding your kitchen scraps. If you don't have these set-up ingredients about the house, you can start collecting them while you're out and about, so you'll be ready once you do buy your first composting system. Even if your system doesn't require you to create these layers, they all make fantastic compost anyway!

Step 3: Start adding food waste to the compost

This is the fun part, where you can start feeling all self-righteous about reducing your household waste, while also creating something incredibly beneficial to your plants. Here are some helpful tips:

a) The 20-80 rule

Unless your composting system instructs otherwise, aim to add approximately 20 percent brown or dry ingredients (twigs, dry leaves, dry mulch, shredded paper) for every 80 percent organic waste you put in the compost

b) Chop things up

Think of your compost along the lines of your garden's stomach. Just as you have trouble digesting large chunks of food, so does your garden. If you chop your waste up into smaller pieces before putting them in the compost, they'll break down a lot sooner

c) Aerate

Unless your composting system has a built-in spinner (or worms) to do the aerating for you, try to turn it every week or so to speed up the process and prevent rot

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d) Aim for diversity (what to put in the compost)

If you can fill your compost with a wide range of ingredients, it will reward you with a rich array of nutrients for your garden. Use the lists below as a handy guide for what to use (and avoid) in a good compost.



Composts love these ingredients:

- * Garden clippings
- * Fallen leaves
- * Shredded paper (not glossy)
- * Vegetable scraps from your kitchen
- * Fruit scraps from your kitchen
- * Egg shells
- * Coffee grounds
- * Tea leaves (but not tea bags unless you're confident they're not made with polypropylene, which can't decompose)



Avoid or at least limit these ingredients:

- * Citrus scraps
- * Onion scraps
- * Vegetable fats
- * Dairy products



Never add these ingredients to your compost:

- * Meat and animal fats
- * Animal (or human!) droppings
- * Diseased plants or leaves
- * Treated wood or sawdust
- * Anything plastic or synthetic
- * Chemicals
- * Metals