

GET COMPOSTING!

Adding organic matter through composting is the best way to improve our heavy but potentially very fertile clay soil. This basic guide aims to encourage more composting at Rosendale.

WHY COMPOST?

The joy of composting is that waste material can be turned into something extremely valuable for soil fertility and healthy plant growth. Well-made compost is full of the life that soil needs, and that plants need in turn. Healthy soil and compost are hosts to micro-organisms, and this microbial activity makes nutrients available to growing plants.

THE SOIL AT ROSENDALE

Rosendale's heavy clay soils are prone to compaction but have high levels of mineral nutrients and can be the most fertile of soils if a good structure can be developed. Organic matter, especially in the form of living compost, will improve structure, aeration, permeability and drainage, increase resistance to erosion and boost nutrient availability.

No wonder some call compost "black gold"!

Don't burn it – Compost it!

Enjoyable as bonfires can be, the waste organic material on your plot should be composting to increase fertility, not going up in unhealthy smoke. There are very few things that cannot be composted including perennial weed roots, brambles and blighted tomatoes. (See "Common Materials to Compost" and "Composting Myths" below). Larger woody prunings can be chopped up small with a sharp spade to speed decomposition.



TYPES OF COMPOSTING

Rapid Composting Method – Hot Compost

This "de-luxe" composting process can produce high quality compost in as little as 1-2 months but takes effort. It is essential to have a large quantity and a good mixture of green and brown ingredients all assembled at one time (minimum 1 cubic metre), and to turn the heap a few days after first building it.

The Slow Method - Cold Compost

This is the most common method used at Rosendale and takes relatively little effort. A good mix "greens" & "browns" is still required, and the heap needs to stay moist, but material is added as it becomes available and turning the heap is not essential. It may need to stand for a year before the compost is ready.

Worm Composting

Useful at home where there is no space (a balcony or patio); they turn small quantities of kitchen waste and cooked food into a high fertility compost but need time and attention.

Uncomposted Surface Mulch

Spreading uncomposted materials on the soil surface takes the least effort, but takes up space and attracts slugs and will rob nitrogen from your growing plants if accidentally mixed into the soil,

When to Compost

Composting is done all year, but the peak time is late summer to early winter.

COMMON MATERIALS TO COMPOST

Use Greens and Browns approx. 1:2 by volume and chop anything large into small pieces

Greens	Browns
Kitchen Waste #	Autumn Leaves++
Animal Manure/faeces	Mature Weeds* and Nettles*
Green prunings	Mature Grass*
Grass Cuttings	Cardboard – esp. corrugated
Comfrey	Paper – shredded/screwed up
Seaweed	Straw
Young weeds/nettles	Woody prunings - shredded
Urine	Thin twigs/stems
Feathers	Hedge Trimmings
Coffee Grounds	

Best not to add meat and dairy products
++ Very large quantities of leaves are slow to break down so best composted separately to leaf mould
*Don't add weed seeds - only a hot heap kills them

Chop/Shred additions as small as possible to maximise surface area and avoid letting any one material dominate the heap, especially grass clippings, as these become a slimy, smelly mess if not mixed with more bulky material.

Other Materials you can Add

Lime: to reduce the acidity of soil

Wood ash: to increase potash levels

WHAT SHOULDN'T YOU COMPOST?

Certain diseased plants such as blighted potato tubers or onions, garlic, leeks etc. affected by the allium leaf miner. These items can be treated as rubbish, recycled into the council green waste or burnt.

GET COMPOSTING!

COMPOST BINS

Composting can be done in an open heap, but bins retain warmth and moisture and make compost faster. Any of the compost bins on the market will produce compost as long as they exclude rain, retain some warmth, allow drainage, and let in some air.

However, bins of 1 cubic metre or more are much more effective, than smaller ones. Many plot-holders use pallets, wired or screwed together, to create large compost bins at zero cost.



One is good, but two or more is better! Having more bins means you can turn the heap from one bin to another, compost can mature in one bin while new material is added to another, and you'll have room to store excess material for composting. The growing space "lost" to the extra bins will be repaid by the extra fertility that more compost will give to your soil.



Where to Site the Compost Bins

Composting works best in constant conditions, so avoid full sun and position on an earth base to allow drainage and access to soil organisms e.g. worms.

SOURCES OF MATERIAL FOR COMPOSTING

- Rosendale deliveries: manure, wood shavings, hops etc.
- Weeds and crop residues from your plot.
- Kitchen waste from home.
- Keep an eye open for materials – including your neighbours' grass and hedge trimmings.
- Bags of leaves are often swept up by Lambeth and left ready for collection!

TROUBLE SHOOTING

- **Too Dry?** – add water and close up any large gaps in the compost bin sides. Cover top with something to reduce water loss.

- **Too Slow to decompose?** – check moisture, turn the heap adding urine or green waste or to every 6" (15cm) layer of compost add one bucket of fresh manure or 250g fish, blood & bone fertiliser.
- **Too Wet/Smelly?** – turn the heap contents mixing in dry bulky material, e.g. autumn leaves, small (hand-size) pieces of corrugated cardboard etc. to keep wetter ingredients fluffed up and aerated.
- **Too small?** – go bigger!! (at least 1 cubic metre). Four pallets is a quick & cheap way to do this.

COMPOSTING MYTHS

- Citrus peel and rhubarb leaves – OK to compost.
- Perennial weed roots (full of useful minerals) won't grow in the compost heap if covered.
- Blighted tomato/potato leaves – blight can't grow on dead plant tissue – so it will disappear in the compost heap – but don't add blighted potatoes – as they could stay alive over the winter.
- Large gaps aren't necessary in the sides of composting containers. Line the bins with cardboard or fill gaps to contain materials and keep the heap moist to speed up composting.

HOW TO USE COMPOST

Sieve ready compost through a 2.5cm (1") wire mesh to remove plastic and larger stones. Uncomposted lumps can be returned to the active compost bin. The ready compost can be spread on the soil surface or lightly forked in. Earthworms will draw it down. If the compost is fully mature you can also use it for planting and potting.

ONCE YOU'VE GOT IT – DON'T LOSE IT!!

The added organic matter and soil fertility can be easily lost through oxidation whenever the soil is disturbed. Once the soil is in good heart and structure, minimise digging, disturbance or compaction (and the worms will also thank you).

Looking after the soil is the key to successful growing and will be covered in another information leaflet.

FURTHER ADVICE and HELP

If you have any composting problems, questions or suggestions or wish to help to make composting at Rosendale more successful – please contact: Adrian Audsley, Plot 233 adrianaudsley@yahoo.co.uk