

Where do I get a compost bin? From the 1st October 2009 you can obtain home composters at reduced prices from a [Lincolnshire wide scheme](#).

How do I know when my compost is ready? Finished compost is the dark brown, soil-like, layer found at the bottom of your bin. It may contain a few items of non-decomposed material, particularly material that was added whole (such as onions or oranges) and twigs or tough plant stems. It will not look like the compost you buy from the garden centre!

Where should I put my compost bin? Your compost bin should be placed directly onto the soil. This allows worms and other soil organisms to enter the bin; liquid formed by moisture and by-products of the composting process can drain into the soil.

How do I get rid of ANTS? The presence of ants is usually a sign that the mixture in the bin is too dry. It is advised not to use ant powder but try watering the mixture with cold water. Be careful not to overdo it! - it should be as damp as a wrung out sponge. Ants will not harm the composting process in fact they can assist it. By making burrows through the material, they provide air passages as well as breaking down some of the material itself. Similarly slugs and snails are not a problem in a compost bin.

I have SMALL BLACK FLIES in my compost bin. What are they? These are fruit flies and are tiny white or brown flies, no more than 2 mm in length. They can be easily characterised by their appearance as a "cloud" when the compost bin lid is removed. To get rid of them, cover the top layer of fruit or vegetable wastes with a thin layer of soil or compost. They should disappear within a couple of days. They are perfectly harmless and are part of the composting process, feeding on the fruit acids contained in the material. Bury fresh material as soon as it is put in the bin to reduce the number of flies if you do not like them. The presence of blue bottle flies means that something is in the bin that should not be there, such as meat or fish products.

How do I get rid of WASPS and BEES? The presence of wasps and bees around your bin will probably mean that your compost is too dry. Try watering the mixture with cold water.

Why does my compost bin SMELL? The absence of air will cause the composting micro-organisms to stop working and be replaced by another type that work without air. The by-product of this activity is a smell similar to that of rotten eggs. Re-

introduce air into the bin by stirring the mixture well. A high proportion of "greens" (kitchen waste/grass clippings) can also be the cause of a strong smell of ammonia in the bin. Add more "browns" (woody prunings, paper or cardboard) to redress this problem.

Why have the contents of my compost bin turned SLIMY? This problem is quite often accompanied by the smell problem. Again, a mixture rich in "greens" is the cause: balance this with the addition of some "brown" material.

Will my compost bin attract rats? This is not as common a problem as is often perceived. By being vigilant about the types of material that is added to the bin/heap, avoiding meat and fish, it is unlikely that rats will be attracted to the bin. The majority of people who have reported seeing rats in their compost bin/heap have generally had rats or mice in their garden before they started composting. The compost bin/heap has become an additional feeding ground on a well worn route. In this case if you move the bin you should remove the problem. Rats will not be so attracted to the bin if you disturb them by turning the compost at least weekly. Some people put a wire mesh across the bottom of the bin above the ground.

Should I use CHEMICAL ACTIVATORS? This is personal choice; some people swear by them, others notice little difference. Natural activators (therefore low cost!) include human urine, nettles, coffee grounds and fresh grass clippings.

Can I put WINDFALL FRUIT into my compost bin? Yes, you can. They will decompose quicker if they are squashed first. As fruit is a "green" material, make sure you add some "brown" material to avoid other potential problems such as excess moisture and smells.

Can I compost DISEASED PLANTS? Unless you are sure the disease needs living plant material to survive, it is best to avoid putting diseased plants into the compost bin.

Can I put LEYLANDII PRUNINGS into my compost bin? These take a long time to decompose and should be shredded before putting them into the bin. However, Leylandii is poisonous when shredded so take protective precautions and shred in the open air. Large quantities are better taken to the garden waste skip at your local civic amenity site.

Can I empty the VACUUM CLEANER BAG into my compost bin? Yes, you can but the dust tends to be very dry and difficult to rehydrate so soak it well first. Most household dust consists of skin particles and will readily decompose. However, the synthetic fibres found in most modern carpets will NOT decompose and will be present in the finished compost.

Should I put WEEDS into my compost bin? ANNUAL weeds should present no problems providing they are put into the bin early in the year before they have chance to set seed. PERENNIAL weeds (such as docks, dandelions, couch grass and bindweed) are better composted separately in a sealed, black sack as there is a good chance they will continue to grow in the compost bin. Devoid of light and air, they will die after a few weeks and can then be safely added to the compost bin.

Can I put PET WASTES into my compost bin? Cat or dog waste should be avoided as it is meat based. It also poses a health risk to children and pregnant women. Bedding and droppings from vegetarian pets, such as rabbits and guinea pigs, are ideal particularly as they are soaked in urine! As the straw, newspaper or sawdust can be too dry, it is best to water this before putting in the compost bin. Sawdust may take a while to decompose and some may be present in the finished compost.

Can I compost ASHES? Ashes from coal or coke should NOT be added as they contain sulphur dioxides. Similarly, charcoal briquette ash can contain a residue of the chemicals added to assist burning. Wood ashes or ash from pure charcoal are excellent sources of potassium but should be added to the compost bin sparingly as they are highly alkali and can interfere with the composting process.

Can I put LEAVES into my compost bin? Leaves take a long time to decompose and should be added to the bin sparingly. The composting process can be accelerated by shredding them first. However, if you gather at least a black sack full, consider turning it into leaf mould.

Further Information For further information on home composting you can either contact us on 01507 601111 or write to: HDRA - the organic organisation, Ryton Organic Gardens, Coventry, CV8 3LG. www.hdra.org.uk