



# Composting talk

## The most frequently asked questions and answers

### Q. Why is 'peat-free' compost better than peat based products?

**A.** A home compost bin produces 'peat-free' compost, which eradicates the need to buy peat products. These are commercially sourced and extracted from peat bogs, resulting in the release of stored carbon from the bogs and damage to the bog habitat. Therefore by using kitchen scraps and garden waste to make compost, an individual can help to prevent climate change, and protect a valuable habitat.

### Q. Why is it important to get the 'right mix' of green and brown waste?

**A.** Getting the mixture right from the start produces good compost. For composting to work properly, your bin needs both moisture and air. 'Greens' (such as tea bags and salad leaves) supply the moisture and nitrogen, and 'browns' (such as twigs and egg boxes) help to circulate the air around the compost. Air is essential for the survival of the microbes that degrade organic waste and help to turn it into compost.

### Q. How should I build my compost?

**A.** The easiest way to build your compost is to throw equally sized layers of green and brown waste, into the bin. Alternatively you could try balancing each caddy of 'greens' e.g. fruit scraps with a caddy of 'browns' e.g. wood chippings. Plus a layer of twigs or branches at the bottom of a compost bin can be a great way of helping to achieve a vertical flow of air through the material.

### Q. Can I compost weeds?

**A.** Extra care must be taken when dealing with certain plants. For example, you must compost annuals (e.g. chickweed, speedwell) before they go to seed otherwise the seeds may survive in the compost.

Perennials (e.g. ivy, dandelions, thistles) are more of a problem and can re-grow from sections of roots in your compost. To prevent this, chop them up and place in a bin liner with no holes, tie a knot in the bag and leave in the sun to get hot and rot down until they go brown and sludgy. Alternatively you can put them in a bucket of water with the lid on. Then add them to your compost bins when they are thoroughly decomposed.

### Q. My bin is really smelly, what do I need to do?

**A.** If your compost is smelly, that's a sign that it needs more air. You need to introduce more oxygen in your bin so that your waste can break down aerobically. Turning the compost for example can add air spaces and reduce compaction.

### Q. How do I know when my compost is ready?

**A.** It can take between 9-12 months for compost to be suitable for use. If the compost is brown, smells like soil and all the household waste that you used has disappeared, then it is ready. And don't worry if your compost is not fine and crumbly - even if it is lumpy or sticky, it is still usable.



### Q. Do I have to turn my compost?

**A.** Regular mixing can help the composting process, as it keeps air flowing through your heap, helps to reduce the mixture from getting too compact, speeds up making compost and prevents bad smell. You can stir the compost by using long-handled garden tools such as a fork or compost aerator. Push it down to the centre of heap, pulling mixture up from the bottom. Or you could simply open up air holes by prodding the compost with your tools instead. Adding items such as scrunched up paper or woody material can also help introduce air pockets into the bin.

### Q. I don't have any compost. The compost in my bin is very wet and slimy, what has happened?

**A.** Too many 'greens' such as vegetable peelings have been added. This means the compost cannot decompose properly due to lack of oxygen. To fix this, add some 'browns', and turn the compost to let air in.

Do not throw away the compost if it is totally water logged as it can be fixed too. It is best to empty the bin entirely and mix in a lot of 'browns' to balance it up. Decomposition will then speed up again. For dry compost, you may need to add 'greens' or a little water to the bin.

### Q. Why do I get a lot of ants in my bin?

**A.** Ants are part of the home composting process but it could mean that your bin is too dry. For a quick fix, add some cold water to your bin. Over time, keep on adding the right mix of 'greens' to keep moisture levels up.

### Q. Will my compost bin attract slugs and snails that will then eat my vegetables?

**A.** For the purpose of making good compost, these garden creatures (which are decomposer organisms) help to break down the organic matter in the bin. Some slugs live only on rotting organic matter and so will have no desire to leave the compost bin in search of other living greens. However, there is no guarantee that they will not be tempted to other areas of your garden.

### Q. Are small black flies good for the compost or should I get rid of them?

**A.** The good news is that they are not an indicator of a failing bin. Fruit flies do not carry disease and do not harm your compost. However, if you find them unpleasant you can reduce their numbers by ensuring that the waste intended for your bin is always covered in the kitchen or wherever it is stored. Or you could simply place a layer of straw, shredded paper or soil over the top of the compost so the flies cannot reach the rotting material to feed on it.

### Q. Do compost bins attract rats?

**A.** Rats may already be living in your local area. A rat is only likely to seek out a compost bin in the garden if the wrong waste items have been composted, making the bin a source of food as well as a shelter. For this reason you should not compost cooked foods, dairy products, meat, fish or bones. However, a compost bin that is used a lot will deter them.

### Q. Is there a way I can compost waste such as cooked food, meat, fish, bones and dairy products?

**A.** Yes, if you want to take your composting to the next level, you could try using a Wormery, Green Cone, Green Johanna or Bokashi system. More details about these units can be found online at [www.surreycc.gov.uk/getcomposting](http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/getcomposting).

### Q. Why do some households have more than one bin?

**A.** The need for another bin depends on the amount of household waste you produce, your garden size and how keen you are as a composter. Keen gardeners can have at least three compost bins so that they have one bin they are adding to on a regular basis with fresh material, one full bin that is being left to compost, and one bin of matured compost that they are using as and when required.

**To buy a bin or to dig up more advice on how to turn your table scraps and garden waste into compost, visit [www.surreycc.gov.uk/getcomposting](http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/getcomposting) or call 0844 571 4444.**